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STRANGERS WITH CAMERAS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF APPALACHIAN REPRESENTATION
IN POP CULTURE

DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts & Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

Chelsea L. Brislin

Director: Dr. Randall Roorda, Professor of English

Lexington, KY

2017

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

STRANGERS WITH CAMERAS: THE CONSEQUENCES OF APPALACHIAN REPRESENTATION IN POP CULTURE

Representations of the Appalachia region in literature, art and pop culture have historically shifted between hyperbolic, colorful caricatures to grotesque, sensationalized, black and white photography. This wide spectrum of depictions continually resonates within the North American psyche due to its shared commonality of Appalachia as the cultural “other.” This othering frequently leaves audiences with a kind of relief that this warped representation of backwards, rural poverty is not their own progressive, present-day reality. Countless artists have exploited the region in order to show the impoverished side of rural Appalachia and spin a failed capitalistic way of life into a romanticized, intentional “return to the frontier.” While these representations are often littered with evidence of economic and environmental devastation, audiences are not educated, or otherwise are not provided enough context on how to identify such signs. Some writers have gone so far as to repeatedly depict Appalachians as aggressive and violent in their primitivism, attributing this to their genealogy in relation to the landscape.

Through analyzing how a selection of insider and outsider works includes or neglects three primary elements crucial to successful cultural representation: compassion, context and complexity, one can begin to broadly define what many Appalachians feel is lacking from their own narrative within pop culture. Something as simple as the angle of a camera can dramatically affect the way a viewer experiences a photograph and its subject. Furthermore, the chosen narrator of a novel can make the difference for a reader between a compassionate portrayal of a region previously unknown to them, and one that enforces the existing stereotype of Appalachia. This dissertation will begin to broach the subject of responsibility in the context of cultural representation, as well as how individual artistic motivations and decisions can have negative, far-reaching consequences for the Appalachian region.

KEYWORDS: Literature, Appalachian Studies, Appalachian Literature, Cultural Representation, Popular Culture

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23 June 2017

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Chapter One: Introduction

“A camera is like a gun. It’s threatening because it’s invasive, exploitative in terms of mass media and it not always true. It can be editorially manipulated into anything the maker wants to say about some place.”

Colin Low, *Stranger with a Camera* 1999

On September 20th 1967, Canadian filmmaker Hugh O’Connor was shot dead in Letcher County, Kentucky, while taking photographs of an off-duty coal miner and his family. His aggressor, Appalachian native Hobart Ison, owned the property on which the family lived and vehemently defended his actions as necessary to protect the people of Appalachia from ridicule following the influx of War on Poverty media during the 1960s. The incident sent ripples throughout the local community with many flocking to the defense of Ison, sharing his frustration with the discussion of Appalachia in mass media at the time. Kentucky native and filmmaker Elizabeth Barret detailed the incident in her 1999 documentary *Stranger with a Camera* and herself admitted, “While I don’t feel the same way he does, I could understand where his rage was coming from” (Barret). O’Connor had been commissioned by the United States Department of Commerce to develop a documentary entitled *US* to illustrate the diversity of the American people. Appalachia was one stop among many throughout North America, yet it would seem that intention, at least in the view of Ison and many of his supporters, was irrelevant. Ison had witnessed the invasion of Appalachia by outsiders, many of whom wanted simply to document Appalachian poverty as a way of soliciting aid and support for the region. The economic monopolization and subsequent devastation brought on by

absentee coal companies left little doubt that Appalachia was in need of significant government intervention in the mid-twentieth century, despite the large number of grassroots movements fighting back. In her documentary, Barret asks the question, “Can filmmakers show poverty without shaming the people they portray?” Is the potential shame of some individuals for a greater cause inevitable? If not, how does one communicate the desperation of the situation while simultaneously maintaining the dignity of the subject?

Representing a given environment in the name of advocacy, although still at times problematic, is not met by Appalachian natives with nearly the criticism, frustration or complexity as those venturing into Appalachia for their own creative expression. Environmental portrait photographer Shelby Lee Adams (1950-) and playwright Robert Schenkkan (1953-) are contemporary examples of outside artists whose stated inspiration has come from impoverished Appalachia and whose works representing the region have garnered national attention. In these cases the artists are asking audiences for an emotional response to their work, not necessarily creating a call to action. An author’s authority to omit or manipulate that which does not promote their vision leads often to an eliding of context, which can in-turn produce large-scale cultural misrepresentation. A handful of artists have produced bodies of works centering on Appalachia with little to no actual exposure to the region. Al Capp, for example, the artist behind the popular cartoon strip *Li’l Abner*, points to a brief hitchhiking trip in his late teenage years as the inspiration for his work. James Dickey, author of the novel *Deliverance* (1970), went on several canoeing trips in North Georgia

and credits those exposures with inspiring his representation of Appalachian. Artists like Adams, Capp, Schenkkan and Dickey prompt questions surrounding intended audience, authenticity and exploitation. How much are these artists profiting from their Appalachian representations? Where are they circulating these images? These queries mirror many of the questions asked of O'Connor's filmmakers during Ison's trial in Harlan County, Kentucky, after which Ison received a plea bargain and spent only one year in prison. For many outsiders, drawing influence from a foreign or distinctive culture can seem futile, as there will always be important cultural foundations and traditions that outsiders cannot fully observe, take part in, or claim ownership of due to their brevity of stay.

Throughout this discussion of outside regional representation, the subject of dignity will serve as the underlying theme tying together the frustrations of Appalachian natives. It was a discussion with Appalachian natives that prompted the subject of my research and subsequently this dissertation. My partner of six years was raised in Bell County, Kentucky, and moved to Lexington to attend the University of Kentucky, where I met him and many of his peers from Middlesboro. After finishing my degree in Art History at UK, I began work on an interdisciplinary MA at New York University. It was there that I developed an interest in photographic representation, in particular portrait photographer Shelby Lee Adams. I was initially frustrated with Adams' ambiguous method (not quite documentarian, but not quite creative artist) and set out to find more information about his approach, as well as how Appalachians have historically reacted to his final products. During a trip back to Lexington, I shared examples of Adams' work

with my partner and many of our friends, noting their reactions as they scrolled through the black and white images taken less than two hours from where they had grown up. Of the group of about six men and women from Southeastern Kentucky, I can confidently say no one expressed admiration towards the work of Adams, and beyond that observation, their reactions ranged from anger to confusion and sadness over how they felt their region was represented in Adams's photographs. One friend asked me where these photos were being shown. Another asked me why they were black and white (you can't see the lush green landscape). The discussion continued and soon expanded to include larger questions of regional representation, with mentions of the *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Deliverance*. The main questions that kept surfacing throughout this conversation were why Appalachia always looks worse than it is, why this side of Appalachia is always thrust into the spotlight outside of the region and whether or not the audience knows or learns anything real about the region through these photos. Their observations and feelings as Appalachian "insiders" were that outside representations like Adams' often fail to demonstrate compassion for them as fellow human beings, ignore the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity present within the region thus perpetuating the impression of Appalachian homogeneity, and are either ignorant of or intentionally omit the vital historical context essential for understanding the circumstances of the subjects represented.

The questions circulating throughout this group of young Appalachians led to my own questions in the context of fine art. While it is true that no region, place or person can ever be fully represented in all of its complexity, for an artist who does not have

roots in Appalachia, what is the draw to the area? Why do hundreds of writers, photographers and filmmakers, often without personal ties to the region, focus on Appalachia as a subject? One argument is that much as the post-impressionist artist Paul Gauguin felt compelled to abandon the bustling city of Paris in favor of the more “primitive” purity and exoticism of Tahiti, so do artists feel compelled to capture what they believe to be an escape from industrialism and commercialism. Many artists have expressed a fascination with the natural beauty of the landscape and have a lingering curiosity with the people that live within it. This idea that stepping into Appalachia is synonymous with stepping back into a simpler time can be dated to the 19th century when the then-President of Berea College, William Frost, wrote of Appalachia as our “contemporary ancestors” (Harkins 43). Working as a kind of muse, representations of Appalachia continue to be malleable and have the potential to shift from hyperbolic, colorful caricatures (as in the case with Al Capp) to grotesque, sensationalistic black and white photography. These images continue to resonate within the North American psyche because they share a commonality of Appalachia as the cultural “other.” This othering can take the form of a documentary, a comic strip, or a gritty photograph and frequently leaves audiences and viewers with a look into what once was, along with a kind of relief that this warped representation is not their own present-day reality. Appalachian Studies scholar Emily Satterwhite explains this phenomenon with regional representation in her book *Dear Appalachia*, writing, “It promoted readers’ confidence in their knowledge about, superiority over, and obligation towards supposedly place-

bound subjects raced as nonwhite or not-quite-white and classes as lower class or 'primitive'" (Satterwhite 16).

It would be too simple to blame American audiences who devour images of "hillbillies" in order to validate their own place on the North American social ladder. This tactic does not get to the real roots of this phenomenon. Audiences profit from these images in their own psyche, of course, yet there are others who stood to profit significantly more from attempting to keep Appalachia as a place of backwards primitivism in the minds of North American audiences. Appalachians were aware of these motives from outsiders as early as the 18th century, as explorer William Byrd degraded and undermined the Appalachian people in his travel notes in order to later claim much of the land for its natural resource value (Billings 55). Most often neglected is *context*, or in other words, an explanation, background or history of an issue or identified problem beyond simple victim blaming. There have been countless photographers willing to show the impoverished side of rural Appalachia in order to spin a failed capitalistic way of life into a romanticized, intentional "return to the frontier." Of course these images are littered with evidence of industrialization (smoke from nearby factories, Coca Cola cans, etc.), yet audiences aren't educated or otherwise provided enough context on how to identify those signs. Some writers, such as James Dickey, have even gone so far as to repeatedly depict Appalachians as violent in this chosen primitivism, often attributing this to their genealogy in relation to the landscape. Often times this bond between land and people is depicted hyperbolically, further creating an othering that inhibits *compassion* for them as humans and equals.

Appalachians are frequently represented as inbred, indicating that they are so fixed to their place and land that procreation occurs throughout the family who reside with them. There have been continual references to Appalachians “feeding” off of federal aid, a trope which twists the bond to the landscape into a parasitic relationship, not a symbiotic one, as would be the case with an agrarian society. Finally, many documentarians describe the issues present within Appalachia as a straightforward and uncomplicated narrative of human decline. For example, there is a complete omission of the hundreds of grassroots movements that have been organized by and for the region. When artists and writers focus in on one aspect of a culture, their readers and viewers are all but forced to experience Appalachia through the same homogenous lens.

Through looking at these three elements: compassion, complexity and context, one can both broadly define what many Appalachians feel is absent from outside representations of Appalachia, as well as narrow in on how novels, comic strips, and photographs can demonstrate these sometimes elusive elements. Something as simple as the angle of a camera can affect the way a viewer experiences a photograph and its subject. Furthermore, the narrator chosen for a novel can make the difference for a reader between a compassionate portrayal of a region previously unknown to them, and one that enforces the existing stereotype of Appalachia in pop culture. Finally, these three elements can and do bleed into one another in an organic way. If a writer or artist intentionally illustrates a compassionate portrayal for the subjects, he or she will in many ways be required to provide context and so on.

Compassion in this case refers particularly to the concern authors shows for the plight of his or her protagonists as well his or her advocacy towards the human and non-human environment. Chapter II looks at specific case studies across a variety of mediums to focus on how different authors have illustrated compassion in their work. I will discuss the evocation of compassion through a close look at James Still's Depression-era novel *River of Earth* (1940) as well as Harriet Arnow's *The Dollmaker* (1954). Still skillfully uses an empathetic portrayal of his child narrator to evoke compassion, and describes the micro-migrations that were occurring in the region during the Great Depression. Throughout the novel, the reader is swept rapidly through continually changing circumstances and confronted with a coming-of-age story, leading to a perspective that precludes the victim-blaming that so often accompanies characterizes portrayals of Appalachia. Through using Still's work specifically, I differentiate between the ideas of empathy and sympathy as seen in such documentaries as *Children of the Mountains* and *Christmas in Appalachia*. *The Dollmaker* creates a diasporic experience using a female protagonist, tackling presumptions about Appalachia and leading readers to view not only the people but the land with a new kind of consideration. In addition to these two case studies, I examine Shelby Lee Adams, whose work lacks compassionate portrayal to which I refer. Adams' *Salt and Truth* (2011) blends his written reflections on real Appalachian families with his black and white portraits. Through a look at Adams as well as a close reading of his photography, I will illuminate how he falls short of illustrating compassion for his subjects through a separation of the human and non-human environment, the

distinctive approach he takes in his photography as well as the subsequent marketing of his work. Throughout this analysis, I adduce Elizabeth Engelhardt's *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature* in order to appropriately categorize the author's insider-outsider status according to her classifications (voyeur, tourist, and social crusader).

Chapter III focuses on the incorporation of complexity in Appalachian literature and representation. Complexity in this case is characterized as a multi-dimensional portrayal of Appalachia, in regards to both individual characters and setting. The broad category of complexity can contract to include individual characters' thought processes and agency or expand to include ethnic and socioeconomic diversity in an area that is often mistakenly represented as homogeneous: white, rural, and impoverished. I begin with a look at Robert Gipe's novel *Trampoline* (2013), which manifests complexity both in the creation of his characters as well as in his approach to the narrative. Gipe uses one principal Appalachian narrator, while also incorporating a cast of characters that vary greatly in personality and situation and require the reader to question how we define success and place in an individual trajectory, as well as a collective, regional one. Each character lends an element to the central story, while at the same time retaining their own agency, narratives and particular backgrounds, thus precluding readers from viewing them similarly to the one-dimensional cartoon strips. Furthermore, the form of the novel itself is complex in its intensely contemporary illustrations and style of narration. In this way Gipe departs even from existing Appalachian writers by insisting on the present and refusing to rely on the

sentimentality of the past, and the romantic introspection that often accompanies it. I will examine Silas House's *Parchment of Leaves* and Frank X Walker's *Affrilachia* to explore alternative ways for how diversity and multiculturalism in Appalachia can and has been represented. Through looking at House's representation of the Cherokee population in Southeastern Kentucky, and Walker's introspective look at life as a Black Appalachian, readers begin to break down the white male homogeneity that pervades the hillbilly stereotype. As a point of comparison, I hope to discuss comic strips such as *Li'l Abner* (1934) and *Snuffy Smith* (1919) in the context of Appalachian complexity. Through examining how the construction and momentum behind stereotypical, one-dimensional portrayals of Appalachia began, I will be better able to describe how authors like Gipe, House and Walker are deconstructing them. While comic strips are inherently more one-dimensional than novels, I intend to point towards the importance of this comparison and how they have worked together to create pop culture moments such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* and the latest from clothing store Abercrombie and Fitch: a shirt with the phrase, "West Virginia: It's All Relative."

Chapter IV will examine how context influences readers and viewers of Appalachian representations. Context within an Appalachian setting is becoming increasingly important as we continue to move through the digital age. Photos from Appalachia can now be shared globally within seconds across multiple platforms. Without appropriate context, many of these photos reinforce much of America's perception of Appalachia and solidify stereotypes without explaining the circumstances of the image(s). Secondly, demand on resources present in Appalachia has increased

perhaps even faster than the technology of photographs, leading to environmental devastation from outside corporations through mountaintop removal among other unethical environmental practices.

Beyond these more recent trends, Appalachia has had a long history of outsiders representing the region without context. Toothlessness, for instance, has become a staple in many representations of Appalachia, yet the marketing campaign that drew Appalachia to Mountain Dew (Willie the Hillbilly) and the use of soda as an antidepressant due to poor access to quality health care are rarely if ever included as a part of that narrative. Without context and often with heavy insinuation, toothlessness is understood to be a result of the subject's own poor choices and seeming lack of respect for his or her own quality of life. Chapter IV will explore two Appalachian novels that construct appropriate context and integrate that background into their narratives in a deliberate way. I will begin with a look at Denise Giardina's *Storming Heaven* (1987) as well as Emma Bell Miles' *The Spirit of the Mountains* (1905), which follow the corruption of the coal companies and subsequent effect on Appalachian residents. Both novels can feel at times as though they are slipping into stereotypes that Appalachians have come to fear, yet both are redeemed by the inclusion of context, which lends a holistic view of the environment in Appalachia. As a counter-point, I focus on one of the most blatant instances of omitting context: James Dickey's *Deliverance*. Dickey jumps from suggestions of inbreeding and developmental disabilities to a vicious and violent portrayal of Appalachia without ever successfully answering or even broaching the question as to why these subjects have fallen into this seemingly primal state of

existence. The reader is left to assume that these conditions are a result of a genealogy present in the region, an assumption leading to the aforementioned “othering” of the Appalachian people. Within this chapter, I also discuss documentaries such as *Christmas in Appalachia* (1965) and *A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains* (2009), both of which focus on the living conditions of Appalachia without lending appropriate context. Viewers are left with sympathy and pity for the subjects, but a worsened sense of understanding.

This discussion has the potential to become increasingly complex, as there are a number of issues to consider throughout these three chapters. The first of these issues is that of genre and its importance in comparing different forms of Appalachian representation. How can one compare a comic strip to a novel, as comic strips are inherently simplified, one-dimensional representations of peoples and places? Similarly, how can an hour-long documentary be compared to a photograph, which represents only a micro second in time and space? Francesco Loriggio addresses potential issues of interdisciplinary comparison: “Each of the new items come attached with a theoretical or critical agenda which has external repercussions as well as its own internal tensions” (Loriggio 256). In other words, every genre or medium has its own set of expectations and deliverables, yet the approach has a ripple effect whose influence can be seen and analyzed through related mediums. Appalachian representation has been spread across almost every medium in art and pop culture, overlapping and reproducing into different forms for decades, all but requiring that these genres be discussed together, as opposed to in silos. Loriggio confronts such a notion: “...Genres are the ground where *all* the

types of comparison, *all* the interdisciplinaries [...] cross paths. Much of the debate about the relation between comparative literature and the other arts, or the other nonverbal forms of expression is actually about the place of genre-based metaphors and models in theory and criticism” (261). My intention is that throughout the discussion it will be clear how different genres have inspired and folded into each other, while acknowledging the individual “tensions” and motivations for each medium. Both the *Beverly Hillbillies* and *Li'l Abner* have their basis in the comedy, yet in *Abner*, the “hillbillies” are the focus of the jokes. In *Beverly Hillbillies*, it is often the locals who end up being outsmarted by the “hillbillies.” While one is a TV show and one is a comic strip, they both use comedy, with one being significantly more damaging than the other. Additionally, Robert Schenkkan was inspired to begin work on his play *The Kentucky Cycle* after reading Henry Caudill’s book *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (Billings 8). Caudill and Schenkkan approached their respective genres differently, as a play typically needs to be inherently more dramatic and plot-driven, yet one can see important parallels between the two works, making the difference of genre secondary to the overarching motivation and responsibility of the respective authors. These same kind of influences can be seen as “Hillbilly” vaudeville theatre inspired the comic books of *Li'l Abner* and *Snuffy Smith*, which in turn inspired writers like Caudill. Admittedly, comparing comic strips to Depression-era Appalachian novels is problematic, yet all of these genres and mediums enter into and further the pop culture hillbilly motif. Such comparison is necessary in order to show how this genre continues and multiplies in a post-modern society.

This is perhaps better explained by stepping outside of Appalachian literature for a moment. Popular Japanese artist Takashi Murakami pioneered the Superflat movement after being inspired by the aesthetic style he witnessed in Japanese pop culture. He turned this seemingly low-brow aesthetic into highly desired, serious, and sought-after pieces in the postmodern art world. As his popularity and influence grew, he began designing a line of handbags and luggage in collaboration with fashion icon Louis Vuitton. Murakami illustrates that unlike much of art history, postmodern developments are no longer a reaction against or complement to the popular movements that came before, but rather can cross mediums, timeframes and genres. Some artists were inspired to take dramatic photographs of Appalachia because they watched the *Beverly Hillbillies* when they were children, thus even subconsciously taking some of the elements from that satire with them into their fine art. Others created comic strips because of scenes from Appalachia in the news during Johnson's War of Poverty. By comparing across genres and mediums I hope to point to what is different, but also what the commonalities are, and by doing so, demonstrate how negative and damaging stereotypes have continued to thrive across all aspects of North American culture.

Another important element of this discussion is that of reception. Each reader or viewer is bound to react differently to a given work based on their own life's experiences; therefore assessing value based on the *majority* reception to a work, could potentially be eliminating the individual agency of the spectator or reader. Generations also often carry the influence or portrayal of a work through their collective reception. A

novel could be defined as one thing in the mind of its author and creator, but carry a completely different identity through the combined reception of its public, an identity that has the potential to overshadow and eventually snuff out whatever motivation or intention the author originally had. James Machor cites scholar Jerome McGann on this dual history and identity in his book *Reception Study: From Literary Theory to Cultural Studies*, writing, “McGann goes on to suggest that a work has ‘two interlocking histories,’ one that derives from the author’s expressed decisions and purposes, and the other that derives from the critical reactions of the various readers” (Machor ix). For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be concentrating mostly on the latter of McGann’s “interlocking histories,” the reactions of readers, both from inside and outside of the Appalachian region. While at times the intention of the author will be incorporated into the discussion, the topic is such that intention of the author can, and often will, become irrelevant when looking towards the greater reception of the public and their feelings and attitudes about the Appalachian region following their experience and engagement with a given work. Yet, as Philip Goldstein points out in his book *New Directions in American Reception Study*, “In the twenty-first century, when formal methods are no longer obligatory and literary study includes diverse literatures and media, the interpretation may examine the author’s intention, the reader’s reactions, the text’s figures, structure or rhetoric, as well as the sexuality, gender, race, or nationality of the author, reader, audience, or text” (Goldstein & Machor xi). All of these categories will circulate throughout this discussion, as all are important to contemporary reception studies and interdisciplinary comparative literature.

The issue of who has the authority to label an insider and not also has the potential to become blurred and complicated. O'Connor was documenting Appalachia specifically because of his status as an outsider, therefore he was inarguably subject to such a label. Others have opted to claim heritage in Appalachia, creating a sometimes-problematic situation in terms of their own identity. Shelby Lee Adams was born in Hazard, Kentucky, but grew up along the Northeastern seaboard, spending summers back in Kentucky with his grandparents (Ruby 339). In his artist statement, he often claims that this work allows him to return to the past and to document his "heritage." Many of his peers from inside Appalachia have rejected his insider claim, arguing that despite his claims, his photography is not reflective of the environment he grew up in, and that he is exploiting his feeble ties to the region for personal gain and professional notoriety. The mayor of Hazard, Bill Gorman, even stated in regards to Adams' work, "I don't think this is average... I think it's the kind of thing that sells" (Coleman). Others venture into Appalachia from larger cities such as Louisville or Lexington, or leave Appalachia for such cities, taking their insider claims to the region with them. These artists, and sometime advocates, ultimately act as kind of semi-insiders. Some artists such as novelist Silas House and filmmaker Elizabeth Barret have succeeded in finding footing with a national audience while also maintaining their "insider status" within Appalachia, but not always without pushback. Their careful balance is aided by their ties to grassroots movements in Appalachia and commitments to established Appalachian organizations such as Appalshop (a filmmaking studio in Whitesburg, Kentucky, established in 1969) and the Hindman Settlement School (established in 1902 in Knott

County, KY). House has also maintained a residence in Appalachia with his children and has continually used his platform to advocate for the region on issues such as mountaintop removal.

Elizabeth Engelhardt has categorized what she deems to be Appalachian outsiders in her 2003 book, *The Tangled Roots of Feminism, Environmentalism, and Appalachian Literature*. She uses the terms voyeur, tourist and social crusader to help organize and define the influx of “outsiders” to Appalachia in the mid-twentieth century (Engelhardt 6). The voyeurs were those who, like Al Capp, had a brief and superficial exposure to the region. The tourist falls more in line with James Dickey: someone who ventured into the region on multiple occasions, but with a clear objective in mind, never straying far from one particular area or motivation. Finally, the social crusader label would fall to the FSA photographers and missionaries that flocked to Appalachia, many sincerely in the name of advocacy. I will use these terms put forth by Engelhardt as I look closely at individual works centering on the region. In this dissertation, I mean to explore this complex issue by looking into what Appalachians feel is absent from work stemming from perceived “outsiders.” I will focus on what Ison felt warranted murder by looking at both “insider” and “outsider” representations of the region in film, novels, and photography and illuminating when and how these representations become problematic for Appalachian audiences.

Through this dissertation I will build on existing works that use this issue to supplement their larger argument, but do not focus squarely on the insider-outsider dynamic in the region. For instance, J.W. Williamson focuses more on the evolution of

media portrayals of Appalachia in his book *Hillbillyland: What the Movies did to the Mountains and What the Mountains did to the Movies*, but does not include much on Appalachian reception to these portrayals. I will explore many of his case studies but will focus specifically on the insider-outsider distinction and reactions to the work he describes. A more in-depth analysis of Appalachian stereotypes in pop culture can be found in Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*. In addition to the history and background of Appalachian tropes, I will include reactions from prominent Appalachian authors, many of whom have come out with defenses combatting the popularity and illuminating the inaccuracies of the stereotype. These reactions are featured in works such as Dwight Billings' *Back Talk from Appalachia* and Emily Satterwhite's *Dear Appalachia*. While both take a close look at how and why the American public consistently embraces both distorted and often romanticized idealizations of Appalachia, neither has the insider-outsider dynamic as its central focus. The field of sociology looks more into this dynamic, coupling the sociological approach with a visual analysis of literary and pop culture works, tropes, and images will prove quite useful. Finally, I will include authors who have examined this issue through fiction. *Trampoline* by Robert Gipe and *Clay's Quilt* by Silas House both examine the role of the outsider and how it functions in the Appalachian culture. I will flesh out their arguments by closely examining how they represent settings and characters.

My intent in this dissertation is not to strip away the agency of readers or viewers by assigning labels such as "good" or "bad" to representations of the Appalachian region, but rather to supplement this discourse with an additional set of

questions and concerns. I will discuss what Appalachians see in portrayals of themselves and how that has been problematic both in the past and will continue to be moving forward. By sifting through this complex issue, I will consider the larger implications of a given work and perhaps add additional criteria in audiences' judgement of a piece. Rather than maintaining typical reception dichotomies such as good and bad, what would happen if viewers begin to ask, is it harmful or not? Does this surprise me? Finally, what would the subject think about my reception to this work? If I feel pity, does the subject want me to feel pity or does the photographer? Finally, my hope is that audiences will begin to ask themselves perhaps the most powerful question in this dialogue: do I as a viewer accept this as truth? If so, how might that be problematic for the region of Appalachia?

Chapter Two: Appalachian Dignity: Compassion vs. Pity

When discussing how a portrayal of Appalachia can be seen as compassionate, it is important to first discuss what “compassion” means in this context and how it is, or is not related to other often seemingly synonymous adjectives such as pity and empathy. To begin, I turn to Roger Crisp’s distinction between these once-synonymous terms, “Pity is often *now* thought of as shallow and motivationally idle. The person who feels sorry for the beggar but passes them by is more likely to be said to feel pity, while the person who stops to help feels compassion” (Crisp 233-234). In this way Crisp indicates that compassion incites more action and energy than pity, whose contemporary definition has evolved to a fleeting and shallow emotion. Throughout Chapter II, I will look at works that represent Appalachia and incite both pity and compassion as defined by Crisp and how that impression on readers has the potential to make the viewer’s experience and interaction with the subjects correspondingly meaningful or shallow and fleeting. Crisp goes on to differentiate between empathy and compassion:

Empathy consists in any kind of imaginative reconstruction of another’s experience, independently of any evaluation of it as good, bad, or indifferent. Often, empathetic reconstruction will involve compassion, but empathy is not necessary for compassion as I understand it, since compassion can, as in the case of neonates, take the primitive form of mere pain or distress in the presence of the pain or distress of others, independently of any imaginative reconstruction (234).

Crisp points out that compassion is commonly used as a tool used to evoke empathy, but it is not synonymous with either pity or empathy. Compassion is a deeper emotion than pity, but does not require the reader to imagine themselves as the subject as empathy requires. My hope is that by taking a close look at the literary techniques used by authors and artists such as James Still, Harriette Arnow and Shelby Lee Adams and what their respective approaches to Appalachian representation trigger in their audiences, we can better identify what falls short of a compassionate portrayal, evoking pity from viewers and readers and inciting frustration from their Appalachian subjects and viewers.

The topic of authorial intention is significant within this discussion. What if an author intends to represent his subjects compassionately, but fails to do so and ultimately incites only pity? The importance of incorporating the background and intention of the author in order to pull apart and analyze a work and its reception was famously denounced by French literary critic Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay “The Death of the Author” (Gass 4). In the case of Appalachian representation, where the status of insider-outsider is so important to the credibility and reception of the depiction, how can one avoid looking at authorial intention? If the author proclaims their love and admiration for the region of Appalachia, but misses the mark in his or her representation, can and do we allow the intention to rectify the product? Ross Chambers questions this, “[...] an issue of responsibility therefore arises, one that Barthes—whose complacency over the author’s death has been widely followed in critical theory—has no room for. It’s an issue of theoretical responsibility: what

responsibility, toward the author, is entailed by a reader whose reading displaces—however inevitably—an authorial sense? And further, what is the responsibility of the reader toward that lost authorial sense itself?” (Chambers 69). If we are, as Barthes argues, in a post-modern society where authorial intention is no longer relevant for analysis or criticism, who then is held responsible for inaccurate, dramatized and/or harmful representations of a region or people? A good example of this dilemma is Robert Schenkkan’s six-hour play *The Kentucky Cycle*. This epic, Pulitzer Prize-winning play follows three fictional families through two-hundred years of development on the Cumberland Frontier and illustrates the history of “violence breeding violence, of the repeated smashing of dreams by ever more distant forces” (Gerard). Schenkkan was quoted in Louisville’s *The Courier Journal* as stating, “Pop culture has created a whole slew of rather horrific stereotypes, so I understand their sensitivity. I came out of this experience as an advocate for these people. Maybe it’s a question of what is a genuine advocacy. Is it being a cheerleader? A chamber of commerce saying everything is right? (Adler). Schenkkan considers himself as an advocate for the region, yet his subjects vehemently disagree that what he is doing is actually advocating, especially given the intense violence and primitivism depicted throughout his nine one-act plays.

Appalachian scholar Dwight Billings pulls apart some of this complexity in *Back Talk from Appalachia* in stating, “As a northerner without a strong background in Appalachian history, my puzzlement took the form of these questions: How could someone so well-meaning, who intended to be an advocate of eastern Kentuckians and had spent several years researching their history, manage to offend so many Kentuckians?” (Billings 286).

Billings goes on to say, “I emerged from my study of Appalachian history and culture with the position that Schenckan recycles the most damaging stereotypes ever foisted upon Appalachia” (287).

As Billings and Barthes argue, despite what the author is intending—the real significance in cultural representation is ultimately the narrative that audiences see in the final product, what comes to mind when they engage the material, and what emotions they carry walking away from that engagement. Despite the author’s stated intentions to advocate for the region, many viewers walked away from *The Kentucky Cycle* with a sense of pity or even fear and disgust rather than compassion, which is ultimately what has led to frustration among Appalachian audiences (Mason 50). This balancing act of striving for authenticity and historical accuracy, yet also evoking compassion requires authors to be more than simply intentional; they must be sufficiently skillful about evoking that particular sentiment from their readers or viewers. Here I will discuss two approaches used by two different Appalachian authors to help illuminate how authors have successfully evoked compassion from readers, even when those readers have had minimal interaction with the region of Appalachia. I intend to look towards James Still’s *River of Earth* (1940) and Harriet Simpson Arnow’s *The Dollmaker* (1954), paying particular attention to their respective narrators and setting and how those deliberate choices have created positive, yet authentic portrayals of Appalachia.

In the foreword to the 1978 edition of *River of Earth*, Southern writer Dean Cadle writes, “*River of Earth* and *The Grapes of Wrath* are the only books chronicling the

demoralizing Depression years that have continued to gain readers in more affluent ones. The major difference between them is that Steinbeck's story deals with a calamity that has struck American only once in its lifetime, while Still is writing of the struggles that have plagued the mountain people since the country was settled" (Still viii). As Cadle implies, Still's novel is hardly one for the faint of heart, as the reader is forced to encounter the harsh reality of Depression-era Appalachia, while also experiencing the resounding resiliency of its main protagonists. The circumstances of the characters are not romanticized nor criticized by Still, but rather portrayed with the kind of frankness that allows readers to focus on the dimensions of the characters and their voices rather than the focusing on the pity-worthy conditions. Much of this frankness is accomplished through Still's chosen narrator, the seven year old protagonist who is shuffled from his family house on the farm to his ailing grandmother's house and in between. The reader is experiencing this world through the eyes of a child, which inherently provides a kind of innocence, resilience and lack of judgement. Enter into the novel and you find the Baldrige family is struggling to survive with three children and a baby; the mines have closed and the matriarch Alpha has burned down the family home, moving into the Meat locker in order to avoid having to share resources with her husband's kin. Among all of that harshness and grit, our narrator brings us moments like this: "We went into the garden in the cool of the evening, turning the vines to look for beetles on the underleaves" (14). It is specifically these moments where readers are able to experience the closeness of this family, the play of a child and a moment of compassion and dignity to bring them out of the darkness of their circumstances.

Another example of this comes about halfway through the narrative, as the protagonist has gone to live with his grandmother. She is rifling through an old trunk looking for materials to sew the young boy a new coat, as his has become worn and thin, all the while telling him of her children and recounting stories from her life. She pulls a red coat from the trunk and the boy is immediately mesmerized by the beautiful garment. The narrative then begins to alternate between the two character's conversation and the boy's internal dialogue as he admires the coat. It is important to note that as this scene spans for several pages, he never asks for the coat, nor does he even ask his grandmother about it, but rather simply longs for it internally: "I looked away and there were red specks before my eyes from long looking at the bright cloth. The icy rime on the windowpane seemed to redden. I longed to stick my arms through the warm sleeves of the coat and go running in to the cold" (Still 123). The reader is unaware whether or not his grandmother has noticed the boy's fixation on the coat as she begins to dust it and clean out the pockets. As his grandmother continues to talk to him, he thinks, "I measured the coat with my eyes, feeling no hope of wearing it" (Still, 124). Finally his grandmother commands him to try the coat on, releasing the tension of the moment where the reader is perhaps unsure of what her intentions are for the coat. This scene is incredibly telling, as it becomes obvious this boy has no expectations for himself, forbidding himself of desiring anything almost as a kind of self-preservation. The reader is aware that his grandmother likely intends to give the coat to him, as she is clearly dusting it out for this purpose, yet as a child, the boy is not able to interpret this scene in the same way. He is only a child and for that reason, does not want to infer

what his grandmother's intentions might be. The tension of this scene is incredibly moving for a reader, as there is an incredibly evocation of compassion here; wanting to protect the boy and help him understand and trust his caregiver in the moment, yet having to remain only a voyeur. In the end, the coat is gifted to him, but even with that seeming resolution, he is still unable to fully accept this offer of generosity. He recoils from a hug and it is this action, where his internal thoughts finally escape him and are communicated in a very small, subtle way externally, that his grandmother seems to stop and perhaps recognize some of what the narrator has been thinking and feeling throughout their interaction.

Still creates a running dichotomy between the matriarch Alpha and her husband Brack. In this narrative, Alpha can be seen as representative of the land and an agrarian way of life in Appalachia, yet much like what had historically occurred to the region, throughout the novel she is breaking down and growing thinner as the crops fail and the challenges of caring for her family continue to rise and become more desperate. Brack is a miner and feels drawn to the coal towns where there is steady money, production and labor opportunities. Still is able to artfully illustrate these two conflicting spheres of Appalachia, agrarian and industry forced together, through attaching these married-together characters to either pole, evoking compassion from readers for the people that represent the environment rather than pity for an environment reflected upon the people. Still writes:

“Forever I’ve wanted to set us down in a lone spot, a place certain and enduring, with room to swing arm and elbow, a garden-piece for fresh victuals, and a cow

to furnish milk for the baby. So many places we've lived – the far side one mine camp and next the slag pile of another. Hardburly. Lizzyblue. Tribbey. I'm longing to set me down shorely and raise my chaps proper."

Father's ears reddened. He spoke, a grain angrily. "It was never meant for a body to be full content on the face of this earth. [...] To make and provide, it's the only trade I know, and I work willing" (Still 51-52).

Readers are given insight into the sacrifices made by the characters and how industry changed the expectations for these Appalachians. Alpha grew up wanting a piece of land and an agrarian lifestyle because to her, that meant self-sufficiency and permanence. Brack however realizes that such a lifestyle isn't sustainable any longer in Appalachia and that reliance on industry is the only way to provide. The struggle with change and the constant battle between want and need is a universal struggle, allowing readers to relate to these characters' interactions, while at the same time allowing a view into the changing attitudes of Appalachians as the coal companies began to move in. This attention to relatability of characters and authenticity of setting helped significantly in providing a counterpoint to the "Local Color" literary genre that had gained traction with a national audience at the time. Ted Olson discusses the significance of Still's entry into the discourse in his article, "The Mighty River of Earth': Reclaiming James Still's Appalachian Masterpiece," writing, "Still's knowing depiction in his fiction and his poetry of one Southern Appalachian locale and its people—dramatically improved on the efforts of 'Local Color' authors (such as Mary Murfree) whose writings about Appalachia were, because they were 'about a place rather than of it,' inaccurate and dangerously

romanticized” (Olson, 91). Here Olson is arguing that Local Color works of fiction served as the “soap operas” in many ways for Appalachian representation. They were overdramatized and misleading—prioritizing entertainment for readers over accuracy. Still’s attention to detail, understated plot and demonstration of the grit of Appalachia all help to alleviate feelings of pity from readers, yet his most compelling inoculation against pity lies with his child-narrator. The young boy remains nameless, which furthers the relatability and universality of his narrative. This novel becomes a coming-of-age novel that demonstrates the resiliency of a child thrust into circumstances beyond his control. Similarly this vulnerability is mirrored in the narrator’s own mother who, like him, is forced to conform as circumstances around her change. As the title *River of Earth* indicates, Still paints a tension between progress and permanence, stagnation and growth, along with the cyclical nature of the landscape. Still creates poles in his two characters and allows his narrator to explore and challenge in the middle—seeing compassion for both sides and including insight that alleviates simple feelings of pity or disgust. Halfway through the novel, our narrator reflects, “I plowed three furrows and pride swelled in me as sap blows a willow bud. It was like being master where till now I’d only stood in awe; it was finding strength I’d no knowing of” (136).

It is clear from the reviews of *River of Earth* that Still’s development of his characters and their relationship to the historically accurate landscape are what sets his novel apart from his contemporaries, who were producing more one-dimensional and often dangerously inaccurate representations of the area, yet the question remains why such an improvement upon Appalachian representation was not circulated as widely as

its Great Depression counterpart *The Grapes of Wrath*. Olson begins to piece together the potential reasons why *River of Earth* has fallen under the radar of the literary canon and looks to two primary reasons. First, while the reviews of Still's novel were, and continue to be, overwhelmingly positive, the majority qualify him as a regional author catering to a regional audience, inevitably narrowing the scope for his work. He writes:

Revealingly in their efforts to position the little-known author of *River of Earth* in the public's consciousness, none of these critics or writers mentioned Steinbeck or *The Grapes of Wrath* as possible touchstones; instead, they compared Still and his novel exclusively to Southern and Appalachian writers and their works. From the start, many critics and writers judged Still to be an author of strictly regional significance—an attitude which has no doubt contributed to the lingering exclusion of *River of Earth* from the American literary canon (91).

This leads me to Olson's second reason this compassionate portrayal of Appalachia could have escaped a national audience in the literary canon of American fiction: the credibility of Still himself as an insider to Appalachia. Still was not born in Appalachia, but rather moved there as an adult in 1932 to work as a librarian for the Hindman Settlement School. Although a native to Alabama, Still was embraced by the Knott county community and empathized deeply with the injustice that ran rampant throughout Coal Country. Olson writes, "It is interesting to note that a cursory knowledge of Still's biography could be used, albeit unfairly and inaccurately, to reinforce skepticism toward *River of Earth*. Resistant critics and scholars might question how Still could possibly have understood the mountain people, since the author was not

a native of Appalachia” (94). Still lived and worked in Appalachia for eight years before the publication of *River of Earth*, and throughout that time made a sincere effort to learn and understand the history, traditions, and environment of the Appalachian people. His attachment to the Hindman School as well as the roots he put down in Appalachia have tended to overshadow claims that he is an outsider attempting to “pass” as someone from the region.

On the opposite end from Still within this insider-outsider spectrum is Harriette Arnow, author of *The Dollmaker* (1954). Arnow was born in Wayne County Kentucky and while she consistently drew her inspiration from her home place, she would often migrate to the city for extended period of time to write (McEuen and Appleton 313). This idea of “place” and home for Arnow was consistently reflected in her characters, perhaps most dramatically in *The Dollmaker* as her protagonist Gertie Nevels is pulled between her agrarian way of life, and the work available at the factories in Detroit, Michigan. Arnow herself was pulled to Detroit during wartime and while she was able to situate herself on a farm, she bore witness to many southern families who were forced to reside in claustrophobic camps which made the longing for the open air and vegetation of Kentucky that much more palpable. Much as is the case with Still, Arnow’s chosen narrator is what conveys compassion in this domestic saga. Martha Billips argues, “By the time Arnow writes *The Dollmaker*, she seems determined to create a heroine physically and spiritually strong enough to defy the conditions that oppress other women—and men—in her fiction” (329). Billips here is commenting on how Arnow has progressed in her representation of female protagonists. She did not start by

painting women like Gertie Nevels, but rather slowly one can see her characters grit and insistence on dignity increase with each new piece. Gertie Nevels, according to Billips, is the culmination of what she wanted to represent in an Appalachian woman: unapologetically strong. It is precisely the strength of Gertie Nevels that prevents pity from readers and rather evokes admiration and compassion for the struggles and sacrifices she makes for her family as they wrestle with the diaspora present in Michigan for Southern migrants. Throughout the novel, Gertie is able to support and many times, save the family through her woodworking—carving dolls and selling them to families throughout the town to stay financially (and spiritually) afloat. Throughout the novel, she is working on a large bust of Jesus, which she is forced to destroy in the end after her son runs away back to Kentucky and her daughter Cassie is killed in a train yard accident. In many ways the death of Cassie is significant because it is a direct opposition to the opening of the novel, when Gertie's son is choking and she is able to perform a crude tracheotomy to save his life. Cassie was too far away from Gertie to save, lost among the train cars, almost pushing the reader to blame industry itself for her untimely and tragic end. In other words, in this novel it is the environment which chips away at the agency of the protagonist, yet as previously stated, Gertie refuses to be a victim and continues to earn the title of heroine. Jack Weston elaborates on how Arnow is able to redirect the issue of blame in *The Dollmaker*, "The enemy is the system and its rulers, not its masses, who are shown to deserve a better system. Read as a political critique of our civilization, the book condemns hegemonic monopoly capitalism but extols the common people" (Weston 35).

Unlike Still, Arnow was in many ways intending to write for an outside audience in order to communicate the strength and resourcefulness of mountain people, while at the same time being careful not to romanticize the struggles that most certainly accompany the region, in particular with women of child-bearing age. In *The Dollmaker*, she accomplishes significantly more than an emotional reaction from her readers, but rather is able to incite compassion for her characters and subsequently for the region they come from. One reviewer, Linda Wagner, goes so far as to call Arnow a “propagandist,” however adding, “I do not mean to suggest that Arnow is only a propagandist for causes. Like all great writers, she creates characters so real that their sufferings and enthusiasms become the reader’s and it is only in retrospect that thematic patterns show clearly” (Wagner 1).

In an interview with Arnow, Danny Miller asks, “Do you feel that you yourself are an Appalachian person, or a hill person? Or do you see yourself as of a different background and culture than the mountain and hill people?” Arnow responded in stating:

I must still feel I’m a hill person. I don’t know. I can’t always identify myself with certain backhill people or certain Appalachian writers, like the man who wrote *Yesterday’s People*, or sociologists who study a small group and from this draw conclusions about the whole, but I’m always going back to the hills. If I don’t visit my home town once a year—although it’s sadly changed by Wolf Creek Dam in the Cumberland River—I feel incomplete. (Miller 90).

It is important to note in this quotation that Arnow herself is in many ways able to claim insider status simply by recognizing how complicated such a claim can be for the region. In other words, it is precisely her hesitation to claim she is a “hill person” that demonstrates her knowledge of the attitudes and customs of the Appalachian people. I argue that organizations like Appalshop (which created a documentary about Arnow in 1988) embraced Arnow despite her having left Kentucky, because she historically tried to represent Appalachia in a way that captured the authentic landscape without reinforcing negative, vaudevillian stereotypes. This balance of being true to what she knew while also being sure that readers were left with a sense of compassion is something that Arnow certainly had to work towards and many of her earlier works such as *Mountain Path* are said to lean more heavily towards the “hillbilly” stereotype (McEuen 324). Interestingly, the evolution of Arnow’s confidence in capturing the region she loved so much can be seen in her narration. She began with short stories from an outsider’s perspective—trying to use someone in the position of the reader to help coax them into seeing Appalachia for its beauty and people. Slowly she began instead to allow her narrators to adopt the position of insider—perhaps feeling more confident in her ability to accurately portray the region as an insider herself. Billips writes: “Arnow’s stay among the hill people, and her growing maturity as an artist, gave her the confidence to tell the story of her third novel [*Hunter’s Horn*] in the voices of the people themselves. After the stay at Keno, she no longer relied on the narrative perspective of outsider, as in *Mountain Path*, or the more familiar town farmers as in *Between the Flowers*” (327). Finally Arnow takes this confidence one step further by taking her native

narrator outside of Appalachia, allowing Gertie to in many ways personify the area, as the Appalachian setting is only present for the first nine chapters. *The Dollmaker* is able to successfully act as a compassionate portrayal of Appalachia, while simultaneously reflecting Arnow's own journey towards her Appalachian identity despite much of the plot happening outside of the region itself.

In many ways, one could compare Harriette Arnow's position in Appalachia with that of environmental portrait photographer Shelby Lee Adams, who despite being born in Hazard, KY has continually moved up and down the Eastern seaboard. The complicated and controversial approach of Shelby Lee Adams has been explored through a variety of mediums ranging from internet blogs to an award-winning documentary directed by Jennifer Baichwal. Aspects of his work and his photographic method have been enthusiastically praised throughout the contemporary art market, yet he has continually received pointed criticism from Appalachian natives, concerned ethnographers, and political figures due to his portrayal of Appalachian poverty and seeming lack of compassion for his subjects (Davis 3). Art critic D. Eric Bookhardt writes of Adams's latest publication *Salt and Truth* (2011), "Adams, a native of the area, understands that while his subjects may lack sophistication, they radiate the enduring tenacity one might expect from living examples of unadulterated Appalachian Americana" (Jenkins). Photographer Daniel Coburn writes, "On the surface, many of these images seem like a stereotypical portrayal of hillbilly life. However, upon closer examination one realizes that Adams's approach is empathetic and it becomes apparent that he is interested in each person's distinctive presence. Each photograph represents a

collaboration on the part of photographer and sitter” (Coburn 33). On the other side of this discourse you have reviewers such as Nick Stillman who writes, “If change is apparent in this part of the country, Adams’s portraits stubbornly suspend it. Recent forays into digital color aside, he has shot most of his work in black-and-white on film, framing his subjects posing frankly beside their possessions or means of livelihood. Save for an incidental logo or tattoo, seldom is post-Depression modernity in evidence” (Stillman 213). While Adams’s work admittedly does not always produce the same reaction, it would be difficult to argue that the photographs do not consistently provoke an acute reaction in audiences. Part of this is due simply to the medium, which inherently renders the subject mute. You cannot hear the resilience of Gertie Nevels, or the conflicted, strained voice of Still’s young boy, but rather can only see and imagine what the subjects are thinking, saying and doing. The rich dialect and dynamic, deliberate movements of the Appalachian subjects are absent, thus rendering the visual static, leaving much of the narrative work up to the audience. In other words, in the absence of narrative, the viewer is in many ways forced to create their own to accompany the otherwise silent images, giving this one frame exceptional imaginative power for audiences. While the important distinctions between photography and novel certainly comes into play within this discussion, I am particularly interested in the deliberate, aesthetic choices Adams makes within his methodology as a contemporary artist in producing his final product that minimize the audience’s likelihood of success in creating compassionate narratives outside of the homogeneous Appalachian stereotype . Like Arnow and Still, Shelby Lee Adams’s subject matter is not inherently controversial

or exploitative, nor is his position as a pseudo-insider to the Appalachian culture. Rather, and unlike the aforementioned Appalachian writers, it is Adams's handling of the photographic process which unnecessarily reinforces the exaggerated stereotype of Appalachian culture, thus inhibiting a compassionate response from audiences, prompting instead pity and even at times disgust for the subjects. Adams's choice of lighting, his photographic mise-en-scene, and his use of black and white significantly alters the feel of the resulting work. It is these deliberate, aesthetic choices within his methodology that make his final products and his attempt at cultural representation particularly problematic for Appalachian audiences and critics. At the same time Adams is taking these liberties as an artist working in contemporary photography, he is simultaneously reinforcing a false notion of identity by justifying his technique through an explanation of autobiography. Through claiming these photographs are self-representative, Adams's title as a contemporary artist working in the global art market becomes deemphasized along with the aesthetic choices he makes as such. Through his continual claims of wanting to document his culture, he has inevitably adopted an unofficial title of documentarian rather than creative artist for audiences, thereby allowing his photographic manipulations to most often be viewed as authentic depictions of what was in front of his camera, rather than acknowledging them as products constructed through a very particular and intentional photographic method and artistic vision. It is vital to note that as a contemporary artist, Adams consciously and consistently uses sensationalism and morbidity to create a product that differentiates his goals from that of a traditional documentary photographer; Viewers

see a warped representation of reality which prioritizes appeal to a contemporary art market over an obligation to truth or authenticity.

Little was said about Adams's formal photographic process until his 2003 book *Appalachian Lives* when Vicki Goldberg wrote the introduction (Goldberg iv). Goldberg explores Adams's photographic technique, going so far as to describe how those techniques can cause a significant difference between what is captured in the photograph and what was actually in front of the camera; however, Goldberg hesitates to take those observations a step further and does not take a concrete position on what feelings and connotations Adams's resulting style leaves with viewers, and subsequently what those viewers' impressions mean for the future of the Appalachian stereotype. Katherine Ledford praises Goldberg's analysis in her review of *Appalachian Lives*. She states the introduction, "provides both an art critic's interpretation of the artistic complexities of Adams's work, and contextualizes that work within the history of photography, a much-needed step towards placing Adams within a broader understanding of 'documentary photographers' (Ledford 392). Indeed, Adams's publishers took a different direction in asking Goldberg to write the introduction, which focuses primarily on the specific artistic and technical decisions made by Adams, a subject that he had previously avoided addressing publically.

In approaching Adams's methodology, it is important to look first at his procedure in the field. His process for locating subjects is by referral, according to Adams. One significant advantage to this process of referral is that it gives Adams a certain level of credibility within this particular region. This inclusion is particularly

important in this case because although he was born in Southeastern Kentucky, his heritage has continued to be a large source of contention. Adams attempts to establish an authentic insider identity to his photographs by claiming they are self-representative and a way to connect to his birthplace and the time he spent in Kentucky growing up, yet despite his roots it is often argued that the socioeconomic differences between Adams and his chosen subjects far outweigh the similarities in location. Furthermore, Adams spent a large part of his childhood traveling with his parents away from Appalachia, experiencing larger cities and different cultures. Adams states:

These portraits are, in a way, self-portraits that represent a long autobiographical exploration of creativity, imagination, vision, repulsion and salvation. My greatest fear as a photographer is to look into the eyes of my subject and not see my own reflection. My work has been an artist's search for a deeper understanding of my heritage and myself, using photography as a medium and the Appalachian people as collaborators with their own desires to communicate (Adams).

Critic Jay Ruby points out the problematic nature of Adams's claim:

He was introduced to this world as a college student and fledgling photographer by his uncle, a doctor, who had some of these people as patients. At best one can suggest that Adams's world shares some similarities with his subjects, but the socioeconomic and class differences are so great as to make the similarity very limited. In a way, Adams resembles Diane Arbus, the daughter of a wealthy

New York family who liked to go slumming and liked to take pictures of freaks, transvestites, and other characters marginal to her culture and class (Ruby 339).

Here Ruby echoes much of the criticism surrounding Adams. The poverty he is exploring through his photography is not his heritage. It is undeniable that this notion of inclusion for Adams, illustrated through his process of locating subjects by referral and dedicating time to meeting and visiting with the subjects, often helps to alleviate the criticism he faces when one begins to address the idea of exploitation.

Once Adams has located subjects to photograph, he meets the family and judging from his subjects' commentary along with Jennifer Baichwal's 2009 documentary depicting this process, he indeed makes an effort to engage them. In his 2012 interview with Catherine Edelman, Adams describes a typical shoot with one of his subjects:

The visits are a lot of hugging and talking and catching up on family affairs, what's going on in the community, sharing pictures, looking at new babies or reading the obituaries of the recently deceased. [...] All in all, it's a long day. At most, I can do three visits a day, and I usually make photographs at a couple of the homes (Edelman).

When Adams begins preparing to stage one of his photographs, he shoots approximately three Polaroid pictures in order to address exposure, focus, and any other technical issues. Adams has explained that while the Polaroid pictures primarily check technical issues, they are also physical evidence for his subjects or in other words,

an “in the field experience” that cannot be reproduced by showing them digital previews of the work. Adams explains that if a picture is particularly good he will make another Polaroid picture for them to keep. This process of taking Polaroid pictures takes several minutes and is more than a simple analysis of the technical setup, but also, according to Adams, a way to encourage his subjects to engage in conversation, relax, and become more natural so that when he switches to his other camera the photographs appear as true representations of his subjects and they have “overcome their own artificial, smiley personas.”

Adams goes on to explain that on his next visit he always brings the photographs with him, and if it is a picture he has decided to include in one of his books, he brings a model release for his subjects to sign, giving him permission to publish and display their photographs. He also gives his subjects a copy of the book they are pictured in so that they can “understand the context of the picture’s use and then distribute other photos to the family” (Edelman). The choice of camera is quite important as a tripod allows time for adequate staging. Adams’s staging of photographs ranges anywhere from simply directing his subjects on where to look all the way to orchestrating an entire day’s event, complete with props, for the purpose of photographing. Additionally, the exposure time required for his particular type of camera does not, as Adams acknowledges, allow for a photojournalist approach and therefore he always has at least a minimal say in how he wants the arrangement and placement of his subjects to be in front of the lens.

Lighting is another crucial element discussed by Golberg, which is particularly relevant in Adams's body of work. It is a component that many who are not formally educated in photography do not consciously take note of yet it significantly affects the overall feel of a photograph. In addition to natural light, Adams effectively uses a combination of artificial lights. Goldberg states, "Adams uses as many as five different light sources in conjunction with natural light, which lends to an unearthly glow of some very earthly creatures" (Goldberg xi). The unearthly glow to which Goldberg is referring is a haunting, melancholic effect produced when a photographer uses artificial light along with natural light. Patrick Keating discusses the combination of artificial and natural lighting in stating, "It may be useful to think of this period of adoption as divided into three phases. During the mid-teens, many cinematographers use artificial lights to supplement a base of lighting provided by natural daylight. The artificial lights emphasize details, without overpowering the daylight's softly graded overall illumination" (Keating 100). In Adams's case, artificial lighting make the background appear darker, and every detail from fine wrinkles to blotchy freckles on the faces of his subjects becomes more pronounced. This increases the contrast within the photograph, making the image appear more dramatic. I argue that this attention to detail and heavy contrast is precisely Adams's goal. The importance of an artist's choice of lighting can be summarized in a column from *The American Cinematographer*, "Close-shots of people can be not only records of their physical appearance, but artistic portrayals of their characters, as well" (Keating 102). Attention to a gloomy background and high contrast

that emphasize lines and wrinkles on faces is reminiscent of a gothic approach and certainly lends itself to creating a kind of gothic frame for Adams's subjects.

This contrast present within the photographs of Adams is primarily reminiscent of paintings from the Baroque period. It brings to mind artists such as Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio and Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, who used chiaroscuro and tenebrism, high forms of contrast, in order to render their dramatic oeuvres (Siple 106) [Figure 1]. Maria Rzepińska and Krystyna Malcharek describe the effects of chiaroscuro in writing, "It is possible to obtain such an effect of light only by employing active darkness. Such darkness is a value active both artistically and psychologically and is indispensable for displaying various possibilities of light and for introducing an element of mystery, ambiguity, and understatement. The contrast with darkness lends to the light a dynamic quality and brings in the element of drama and pathos" (Rzepinska and Malcharek 92). A clear example of the effect of chiaroscuro with Adams's work can be seen in *The Hog Killing* from 1990. [Figure 2] In this photograph, the sky behind the family appears dark however in actuality the day was bright and only slightly overcast (Baichwal). Furthermore, the intense lights and darks accentuate the expressions on the faces of the family, as well as the bloodied hog carcass in the center of the photograph. Areas of the hog as well as some of the clothing on the family members appear bleached white like bone, while the trees encircling the family are almost black, forming a claustrophobic barrier around the scene. Adams's technique here creates significant tension for the viewer and produces a different kind of intensity akin to the gothic genre of painting.

Goldberg continues on in describing Adams's photographs as, "Theatrical, dramatic, posed, and studied, inventive and experimental in their handling of space and light, clearly informed by a knowledge of art" (Goldberg, x). How then does this description lend itself to the type of photography Adams produces? Adams is most often incorrectly labeled as either a documentary photographer or a photojournalist. It is important to note that Adams does not, nor does he claim to photograph Appalachia with the sole intention of documenting. His status as a contemporary artist needs to be better emphasized within this discourse as it is vitally important in understanding that Adams's intention is not to document, but rather to create. What one sees in his photographs is not what would be there with or without the camera, as is the intention with photojournalism. Adams self-identifies as an environmental portrait photographer, or in other words, an artist who creates visual narratives from portraits taken most often in a subject's own environment. This distinction is incredibly important when one considers the idea of exploitation. Adams is using his access to subjects in their natural environment to craft a visual narrative that appeals to a global audience. As Goldberg stated, Adams is theatrical and inventive in his work and his title as an environmental portrait photographer does not hold him to any certain standard. He is able to stage and manipulate any scene as needed in order to produce a narrative that matches his preexisting artistic vision.

Spacing is yet another key issue that is explored by Goldberg and is important in addressing Adams's technique and intention as an environmental portrait photographer. In many of his photographs, Adams intentionally uses space to convey a

sense of uneasiness in the viewer through a kind of warping or distortion of the scene. He often uses an object or some kind of physical obstruction to cut vertically down the middle of a photograph, bringing to mind the triptychs of the Gothic and Medieval periods. This technique can be seen in several of his photographs, with one in particular being *The Home Funeral*. [Figure 3] A wall in the house splits the photograph down the middle with the coffin and two young girls on one side and a woman holding a baby on the other side. Another example is his photograph *Leddie and Children*. [Figure 4] In this photograph, a beam on the front porch cuts the photograph down the middle, increasing the depth of field on both sides of the beam. As a viewer, this technique brings a certain level of discomfort to the photograph. A viewer is habitually accustomed to settling on a center of focus, or a “vanishing point.” With photography in particular, viewers are accustomed to seeing what the artist wants them to see in crisp clear focus, often in the middle of the photograph, while the less important details are kept out of focus or out of the center of the photograph. Adams plays with this concept, however, by placing an obstruction in the center of the photograph, forcing a viewer to explore outside of their natural comfort zone into the sides and corners of the picture. In case there were any doubts as to whether or not this full exploration of the photograph is indeed a purposeful technique, one must look only at his depth of field. For instance, in *Leddie and Children* every child’s face and expression is clearly visible to the viewer, illustrating that those details are equally important to the face in the foreground. The leaves on the trees and the nails on the house are all in focus, creating

a kind of sensory overload. The Museum of Contemporary Photography comments on the effect of these decisions by Adams:

Adams achieves both a special quality of light and a depth of field that keeps everything, from the wall-calendar in the foreground to the stark bulb on the ceiling to the ferns above the coffin, in focus. Adams's composition – marked by sharp division of space and clarity of detail – places the viewer in the role of omniscient visitor to this otherwise private moment (Museum of Contemporary Photography).

This assertion by MoCP explains clearly why this technique can be uncomfortable for viewers. A viewer can easily begin to feel voyeuristic. Adams explains his own rationale for using this particular technique within his photographs, “My father and others didn’t see the culture the way my uncle did, so there was always this difference in my own family. It may explain why I photograph the way I do, in a direct, straightforward manner, working with a cumbersome view camera, expressing some tensions and divisions within the photographic compositions (May). Adams admits here that “divisions within the photographic compositions” are meant to express tension. His rationale is that essentially these divisions are personifications of the divisions between his own family. This comment further indicates that Adams is not interested in communicating the narrative of his subjects, but rather in using these subjects as props to express his own narrative. He makes viewers uncomfortable in an attempt to mimic or recreate the tension he felt in his childhood, yet causal viewers will be unaware of his

intention and will instead feel only tension for the subjects in the photographs, essentially directing the negative connotations to the scene at hand.

With the intense contrast provided by the artificial light sources, the use of black and white furthers the drama of a given scene. The technique allows him to increase contrast and therefore sensationalize the scenes he captures. James Goodwin discusses the power of black and white photography:

Within a discourse shared by judicial institutions and print culture, the factor of documentation "in black and white" has promised equivalence, proof, veracity, and legality. [...] With its powers to convey the impressions of eyewitness actuality and transparent objectivity, photography intensified "the reality effect" in our black and white print culture. Uncertainty and skepticism over such claims for photography emerge in the midst of the flourishing documentary practices of the 1930s (Goodwin 273).

Goodwin's comment begins to articulate why the use of black and white is so relevant to the subject of exploitation. As he points out, black and white suggests a kind of "veracity" and "validity," two ideas that help to cement this idea that Adams is documenting narratives for viewers when in fact he is creating them.

While Goldberg does a particularly admirable job of describing in detail many of the technical elements of Adams's work, her regard for him as an artist engaging in exploitation is rather ambiguous: "Exploitation is a moral term without strict boundaries that changes with changing social attitudes and often takes different shape in individual

minds. Being at least half of an insider, Adams is in a better position to defend himself than most photographers. His closeness to his subjects has even increased overtime. He says he loves these people and that they have empowered him spiritually” (Goldberg xv). Ledford is quick to comment on this assertion by Goldberg by asking how exactly his kinship or ties to the people of Kentucky affect how he takes his photographs and how people from outside the region view his photographs. Clearly Adams, at least partially, explains his rationale in his artist statement and the text that is intermixed between the photographs in his books. However, Ledford points out that “only viewers who are readers know these feelings. The casual observer who flips through Adams’s books encounters images of a rawness that, arguably, only a dispassionate person could publish (Ledford 394).

While Goldberg takes a defensive position concerning Adams, I have argued that his photographic choices and technique lend themselves quite easily to criticism. I am not speaking here of his habit of using Polaroid pictures or of his interaction with his subjects, but rather the aesthetic quality of his final product. It is difficult to reconcile Adams’s choices which produce discomfort, high emotional intensity, and a false sense of validity with his stated intentions. The high contrast, high definition, depth of field, black and white, and use of artificial lighting all capture the environment of Adams’s subjects and make them appear unnecessarily morbid, dark, and desperate. I find it difficult, particularly following the formal analysis by Goldberg, to find which technical photographic choices Adams makes within his methodology that are meant to reinforce his stated intentions and highlight the dignity and resourcefulness of the subjects.

The fundamental problem with Adams is that while this gritty and dramatic technique appeals to a fine art market and allows him a more lucrative and global career, the discrepancy between his photographic style and what he continually states is his true intention as an “insider” to the region creates a problematic situation for Appalachia. In this case, while Adams claims that these are his people and he wishes to portray them positively, the photographs still appear dramatic and negative to audiences. How then are viewers to justify these conflicting ideas? One answer is simply that audiences could believe that what they are seeing is the real Appalachia and that perhaps there is no positive side to be illuminated or “false” stereotype to be corrected; if there were, then why would this artist who claims his love for the region not capture it? Therein lies the evidence for how fully the visual, artistic choices made by Adams and many others who try to represent the region, ultimately breed the larger questions of regional and cultural representation explored within the fields of sociology, anthropology, pop culture studies and the like. Circling back to Roger Crisp’s analogy of compassion versus pity: because of Adams’ aesthetic choices, viewers’ reactions are more synonymous with pity than with compassion, making his work problematic for Appalachians.

As mentioned before, while intention cannot be ignored throughout this conversation as Benjamin has suggested, it is important that it remain only one part of the larger discussion. An artist like Shelby Lee Adams may sincerely want to represent his Appalachian subjects with dignity and evoke compassion in audiences yet simply lack the photographic knowledge and skills to do so. Furthermore, it is unlikely that an

author or artist who is not intentional about inciting compassion towards the region in readers will be able to do so without falling back on previously circulated stereotypes. In other words, intentionality can be seen as the first step to a successful Appalachian representation, but close attention to narrators, use of dialect, framing, lighting and all other elements in the composition need to be considered in the construction of an Appalachian representation. In order to better demonstrate the effect of Adams' photographs, one can look towards fellow photographer William Gedney (1932-1989). Gedney, a NY native has received relatively little criticism from the Appalachian region for his photographs. Like Adams, he received the Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts and often would photograph family lineages in Kentucky. His photographs, although they share many similarities with Adams', do not evoke the same kind of static perspective. He photographs a mother brushing her child's hair [Figure 5], a group of men working on a car [Figure 6] or an older women dressing a chicken [Figure 7]. These photographs show agency, traditions and culture. Viewers admiring his work can see his subjects living, not exclusively the conditions where they live. His subjects are not posed and therefore Gedney captured moments like a father kissing his baby, a little girl dancing in a sun-filled kitchen, or two sisters bickering. The rest of American, despite the differences in hobbies and agenda, can see themselves in the photographs, chipping away at the "otherness" that so often plagues Appalachian representation. Still, Arnow, and Gedney, despite their potentially problematic Appalachian "insider" status, were able to create successful representations of Appalachia through creative narrative choices and careful use of dialect. I would argue that all of the artists discussed present

a realistic side to the real struggles of Appalachia, yet not all are able to provide an alternative lens through which to view them. Adams inhibits a compassionate response, as he silences his subjects and dictates the frame through which audiences engage the region—thus reinforcing preexisting stereotypes.

Chapter Three: A Diverse Appalachia: Documenting Complexity

One of the most challenging aspects of Appalachian representation deals with overcoming the “essentialist view of a homogenous Appalachian culture” (Fine 3). Beginning as far back as vaudeville, Appalachia and the mountain people have been represented and stereotyped as one-dimensional, white, heterosexual, and uneducated. Mountain people of color, homosexuality and female diversity (setting aside the sexualized versions of women such as Daisy Duke from *The Dukes of Hazzard* and Daisy Mae Yokum from *Li'l Abner*) and are often absent in mainstream Appalachian representations, despite their very real presence in the region. Some authors such as William M. Drennen Jr. and Kojo Jones have had to make a deliberate effort to introduce the reader to the realities of diversity in Appalachia specifically because the complexity they wish to portray in the region is in such direct contradiction to what readers believe to be true about the area. In their memoir, *Red, White, Black, and Blue: A Dual Memoir of Race and Class in Appalachia*, Drennen and Jones begin by “...first clearing the slate of typical Appalachian stereotypes. The authors clearly demonstrate that Appalachia is much like the rest of the United States. Its residents are sometimes black, sometimes white; they are rural, urban and suburban, and working class, middle-class, and wealthy (Shope 387). This is in direct contradiction to the common understanding of the American public who believes “Appalachia is in America but not of America” (Billings x). Of course the ideal understanding of Appalachia falls somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. There are specific elements that make this region distinctive: the landscape,

the dialect and specific cultural traditions. Issues such as poor healthcare, lack of industry and extreme poverty are also often pointed to in representations as specific only to the Appalachia region, yet these are issues present in many rural communities and small towns throughout the United States. In this chapter I will explore examples of Appalachian representation that attempt to diffuse the homogeneity of the Appalachian stereotype by intentionally including complex characters, settings and themes that differ from those circulated through pop culture and genres like the “Local Color” movement. This complexity takes the form of racial diversity, socioeconomic diversity, as well as diversity within individual interests, hobbies and traditions. These more complex, deliberate inclusions begin to chip away at the notion of Appalachia as romanticized “modern-day ancestors” and furthermore, help to illustrate that Appalachia, while retaining its own traditions and culture, is still representative of the larger United States.

To begin, it is important to explore the roots of the homogeneity so that I can better articulate how certain authors and artists are resisting them. Perhaps one of the earliest, circulated accounts of Appalachia comes from Virginia planter William Byrd II of Westover who, during his time exploring the North Carolina-Virginia border, wrote of the local people he encountered, “Surely there is no place in the World where the Inhabitants live with less Labour than in N Carolina. It approaches nearer to the Description of Lubberland than any other, by the great felicity of the Climate, the easiness of raising Provisions and the Slothfulness of the People” (Flora 471). Of course Byrd had by that point recognized the natural resource value of the land he was

exploring and would continue to directly benefit from minimization of the Appalachian people. This tactic of degrading the people who inhabited this region continued as others began to venture into the area and soon, this comic portrayal of slothful poverty was being circulated in travel logs, magazines, advertisements and comic strips. As the United States began to turn into the twentieth century, the "Local Color" genre began to gain momentum, with authors making quick tours of the region and then quickly turning those brief exposures into romanticized books meant for soap-opera like entertainment for the more urban areas of the United States. John O'Brien, author of *At Home in the Heart of Appalachia*, writes of this phenomenon in *The New York Times*, "As the mountains were denuded, the industrialists portrayed the families they were robbing as "backward people" and themselves as the prophets of progress. The missionaries who often accepted large donations from the industrialists exaggerated the "otherness" of these strange people" (O'Brien). These already exaggerated accounts of Appalachia by authors such as Mary Murfree and John Fox Jr. were used as the "real" foundation upon which to build satirical versions of Appalachia. O'Brien writes, "'Local Color' writers made brief visits to the mountains, then wrote fanciful books about the queer, violent mountain folk. As realistic as Harlequin romances, local-color books like Mary Murfree's 'In the 'Stranger People's' Country' were read and reviewed as journalistic accounts. College professors began to use them as textbooks in sociology classes" (O'Brien).

In essence, writers began to create satires of satires: what was already a fictionalized and romanticized version of Appalachia, resulting in portrayals that strayed so far from any real ties to the region that they were at times unrecognizable even to

resident Appalachians. Beginning with the omission of racial and socioeconomic diversity, perhaps one of the most influential examples was the comic strip *Li'l Abner* by Al Capp (1909-1979). *Li'l Abner* told the story of an extended, mountain-dwelling family living in the fictional town of Dogpatch, KY and relied heavily on the hillbilly stereotype. At its height in the 1940s, *Li'l Abner* was being published in over 900 newspapers within the United States and another 100 newspapers abroad for a total circulation of over sixty million readers (Harkins 125). The reason behind the vast success for *Li'l Abner* is complex, yet one reason undoubtedly lies in Capp's cast of characters. Capp had only a brief encounter with the area of Appalachia, yet he claimed that his characters were loosely based off of actual people he met indigenous to the region (Eller 1513). In taking a close look at the comic strip itself, along with other hillbilly stereotypes in circulation in popular media at the time, one can conclude that Capp's characters could not have been based on his own exposure to Appalachia and instead were more likely inspired by caricatures of the region that were circulated widely at the time he began working on his comic strip. Half of Capp's characters encapsulate the honest, "do-goodedness" trope of the mountain people. The second half of the characters embody the grotesque, violent, and primitive perception of the mountain people and were an attempt to include a sign of social progression by establishing the American "other" in the hillbilly.

Capp was born in New Haven, Connecticut in 1909 to Russian immigrant parents. In many ways the American dream came to fruition for the Caplins, as they were freed from the religious scrutiny they had received in Russia due to their Jewish heritage, yet their financial situation was strained and they were often unable to find steady

employment. At the age of nine, Capp was involved in a trolley accident and lost his left leg as a result of his injuries. Capp has often said that this incident, along with viewing the struggles his parents had upon arriving in America, gave him a critical view of American society in general. When Capp was a teenager, he went on a hitchhiking excursion with a childhood friend through the Cumberland Valley and West Virginia. Capp claimed that the “mountain-dwellers” he encountered on this journey provided the inspiration for his characters in *Li'l Abner* (Capp 129).

I argue that Capp is doing precisely what Anthony Harkins describes, “In its many manifestations, ‘hillbilly’ has been used in national media representations and by thousands of Americans within and outside the southern mountains to both uphold and challenge the dominant trends of twentieth century American life—urbanization, the growing centrality of technology, and the resulting routinization of American life” (Harkins 4). In addition to the novels of Local Color writer John Fox Jr. that Capp read as a child, as well as the popular vaudeville shows Capp encountered while he was living in New York City, these stereotypes clearly influenced Capp’s interaction with the image of the hillbilly. His wife recalled one of those vaudeville shows in particular saying, “We went to a Vaudeville theatre in Columbus Circle. One of the performances was a hillbilly act.[...]They stood in a very wooden way with expressionless, deadpan faces, and talked in monotone, with Southern accents. We thought they were just hilarious. We walked back to the apartment that evening becoming more and more excited with the idea of a hillbilly comic strip” (Harkins 126).

The first purpose served by Capp's characters had to do with providing a symbol of social progression to the American public in order to boost morale at a time when humor was used as an escape from a depressed economic situation. Appalachian scholar Ron Eller writes, "During the economic and social hard times such as the 1930s, the dunce-capped and disheveled 'hillbilly' offered self-effacing humor and the assurance of social progress" (Eller 1514). One example of such a character is Senator Jack S. Phogbound, a character who is extremely corrupt and is privy to a series of conspiracies. His name, a playoff of the word "Jackass" by Capp, clearly demonstrates that Capp intended him to be one of the villains in the strip. He is seen regularly carrying a ramrod rifle as well as a coonskin cap. His demonstrated lack of intelligence as well as his "primitive" methods for resolving conflict are elements that bring comfort to a society marked by political unrest. It reinforces the idea that while politics in America at the time are not perfect, social progress can be illustrated by such a dramatic comparison.

Wolf Gal, a wolf-woman hybrid and villain in *Li'l Abner*, was known for luring men to her wolf "den." It was insinuated that Wolf Gal was a cannibal, and would eat the residents of Dogpatch she managed to lure to her wolf family. Such a character is attempting to instill an idea of the primitive in readers. Earthquake McGoon was a character described as a traveling wrestler who lived in nearby Skonk Hollow, which itself has particular significance for the point Capp was attempting to illustrate. It was an area that was full of corruption, violence, and people like Earthquake McGoon who continually threatened *Li'l Abner's* future wife Daisy Mae with sexual advances.

Residents of Skonk Hollow reflect the bad primitive, where morals and honesty are irrelevant as opposed to the “good” primitive of the Yokums, who have managed to escape corruption and remain true to their pure values.

Throughout his comic strip, Capp continued to shed light on the corruption of the American public by the “society of the consumer” mentality. Capp believed this mentality was negatively affecting the American public and regularly contrasts it with the “good primitive” of the Yokum family, or the pure, and honest values they hold, supporting the mentality that sometimes “ignorance is bliss.” Sandra Ballard addresses Capp’s position on his characters, “Capp described his rawboned rustics as a “family of innocents...the innocence of theirs is indestructible, so that while they possess all of the homely virtues in which we profess to believe they seem ingenuous because the world around them is irritated by them, cheats them, kicks them around. They are trusting, kind, loyal, generous, and patriotic. It is a truly bewildering world in which they find themselves” (Billings 144-145).

Al Capp himself reinforces Ballard’s analysis when describing Abner, furthering the idea that these characters were carefully constructed for the purpose of making a point about what he believed to be the downfall of American society in consumerism. In 1959, Al Capp was quoted in an interview, “The most effective way of instantly producing comedy was to create and get people to believe in a thoroughly believing and trusting guy, of perfect innocence[...][Abner] does believe in the complete decency of other people, so then contrast him with the world as we know it [laughs] where people aren’t really very nice” (Howard). This comment cements the idea that the

character of Abner is portrayed in a particular way in order to contrast America as Al Capp saw it. One of Capp's lifelong friends is quoted as describing Capp's work as, "It didn't matter where the frauds came from, or the phonies, Al was going to deal with it" (Al Capp Documentary).

Many of the traditions Capp describes as a part of daily life in Appalachia are inauthentic in the context of Appalachia, yet have remained ingrained in the American imagination. Sadie Hawkins Day for example, now celebrated all across the country, is an event almost always associated with Appalachia, yet the concept was created entirely by Capp and was something that had no real basis before he invented it. According to *Li'l Abner*, the mayor of Dogpatch had a daughter named Sadie Hawkins, whom he felt was the most beautiful girl in Dogpatch despite evidence to the contrary. He wanted his daughter to be married so he made a day, Sadie Hawkins Day, where the boys have to run away from the girls and if a girl catches a boy then he must marry her. Due to the immense popularity of *Li'l Abner*, the concept became a national phenomenon, yet it was never a part of Appalachian culture prior to its invention by Capp.

The character of Mammy can often be seen serving pork chops with trashbean soup and catfish eyeballs. While pork chops are served regularly by families in Appalachia, the idea of "trashbean soup" and "catfish eyeballs" is clearly intentionally hyperbolic (McNeil 260). A recent study that polled 428 families living in Appalachia showed that while the use of fish in Appalachia had increased from 1990, it is canned fish that is consumed and whole live fish are still rarely served in households. While

details such as the food mentioned in *Li'l Abner* might seem insignificant, it illustrates the artist's creative license and how the myth of Appalachia can begin to grow in the collective nation's mind as they continually see these references repeated throughout pop culture.

Finally, the language of the comic strip cements the idea that Appalachians are illiterate and uneducated. Every character speaks with what is supposed to be a "southern" accent; yet these phonetic spellings are often inconsistent and incorrect. In the journal *American Speech*, Stephen D. Malin discusses the inconsistencies within *Li'l Abner* in stating, "Whether it actually represents a dialect, or feigns it, as in the cases under discussion, the unaccustomed spelling is often in heavy block letters, regularly hyphenated when more than monosyllabic, and cushioned on either side by conventional spelling" (Malin 230). Furthermore, Malin points out how when one of the "city folk" says something in *Li'l Abner*, it is always spelled correctly. He uses the example of the word "gourmet." When the city folk pronounce the word, it is spelled correctly, "gourmet" yet when *Li'l Abner* says the word "gourmet" it is spelled, "goormay." The word is pronounced the same, no matter the spelling demonstrating that Capp is using language to differentiate between city and country, and attaching a more primitive label onto the "country folk," by intentionally misspelling words (229). A tactic like this reinforces ideas of illiteracy in Appalachia, which is further cemented in the character of Pappy, who is known to be illiterate throughout the entirety of the comic strip.

As put by writer Anthony Harkins, “the specifics of Capp’s early life and the origins of *Li’l Abner* are hard to pin down, largely because Capp was always willing to embellish in the name of a good story (Harkins 125). I argue that embellishing for the sake of a good story is precisely what Capp did when he stated that his characters were based off of his own experiences and Appalachia, and because of these embellishments, a stereotypical image of the region has been reinforced millions of times by millions of readers all around the world. Contrary to these characters being created from Capp’s own experiences, which is highly unlikely due to his limited exposure to the area as well as his inaccurate portrayals of the culture, Capp in fact, created these characters, drawing on his own exposure to previously existing stereotypes. Bobby Ann Mason, a Kentucky writer, addresses this repercussions of this, “Mountain people are the last group in America it is acceptable to ridicule. No one would stand for it for a minute if you took any other group[...] and held it up as an example of everything that is low and brutal and mean. But somehow it’s OK to do that with hillbillies” (Good and Borden 266).

While Capp may not have realized it at the time, his creation prompted a homogeneous and highly inauthentic version of Appalachia to spiral throughout popular culture. The precedent that was set with *Li’l Abner*, that stereotypes can be unfounded, published, and portrayed as truth has had extremely negative consequences for the Appalachian culture, especially given the popularity of Capp’s creation. Emily Satterwhite writes, “Appalachia in the national geographic imaginary . . . has largely remained an essentialist vision of the region—white, rural, poor or working-class

mountain people.” (Satterwhite 3). The problems with portrayals such as *Li'l Abner* would perhaps not loom so large for the region if they were not the only narratives circulated through pop culture. In other words, the issue is not necessarily that Al Capp or John Fox Jr. embellished their stories, but rather that these embellishments are not met with any counter narratives. The homogeneous, white—washed depiction of Appalachia has a monopoly in the American consciousness, which is where the root of the problem exists. Many authors who attempt to fragment this idea are either discounted or labeled as “regional writers,” catering to their own demographic and not to the larger American public who wants to consume more about our “contemporary ancestors.”

One artist who has experienced relative success in fracturing this white, uneducated and lazy image of Appalachia is Frank X Walker, a Danville, Kentucky native. This 2013 Kentucky Poet Laureate is the author of *Affrilachia*, a collection of poems that recount his experience growing up black in Appalachia.

I have accepted the responsibility of challenging the notion of a homogeneous all-white literary landscape in this region. As a co-founder of the Affrilachian Poets and the creator of the word Affrilachia, I believe it is my responsibility to say as loudly and often as possible that people and artists of color are part of the past and present of the multi-state Appalachian region extending from northern Mississippi to southern New York (Long 2010).

Throughout *Appalachia* he recognizes and praises the matriarch of his family and his sisters, as well as the tension and successes he experienced while being a minority in an area that is often thought to be exclusively white. In his poem *Cease Fire*, Walker writes:

they say people
fall in love
with their own reflections
that daughters look for someone
like their fathers
but my Yoruba-faced sisters
all married white boys
my brothers and nephews
do not discriminate
collecting ebony and ivory
prom pictures
like trophies¹

Here Walker, merely by identifying the setting as Kentucky, fractures how audiences have historically viewed the region by evoking images of “ebony and ivory” prom photos.

Contrary to what popular culture would seem to indicate, Appalachia has consistently seen a steady presence of non-white residents and at one point during the turn of the 20th century, over 10% of the population was black. In 2000, a national

¹Long, 15.

census found that 8% of Appalachia identified as non-Hispanic black, with another 4% identifying as Hispanic or non-white. This percentage translates to about 2.8 million minority residents in the Appalachia region (Pollard). Nikky Finney, South Carolina author of *Rice*, praises Walker's refreshing take on the minority perspective in Appalachia:

Finally, a gathering of words that fiercely speaks to what it truly means to grow up African-American in Appalachia. These are not stories of those of us transplanted conveniently into the territory for whatever reason. These poem-stories are from a native Affrilachian heart, more specifically, from the man who first created the word in order to define and not be rendered invisible. This personal poetic narrative is a historic valuable offering, one man's unapologetic truth, granting us an eagle eye view into what it means to be young, Black, artistic, and male in America as one century comes to an end and another begins. His poetry looks you in the eye, in plain-spoken unembellished, heartfelt language. Anyone who knows about the human heart and human nature can read it (Finney).

In addition to discussing black Appalachians, Walker incorporates a conversation surrounding LGBTQ* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) Appalachians in his poem *Hummingbird*:

midnight

and somebody I know

is dead
from AIDS
at thirty-seven
they're not even flying him home
gonna plant him in Cali
give away all his shit
and come back to Kentucky
believing nobody ever knew
the truth
family never talked about
him being gay
and didn't defend him
when others called him
punk, faggot or sissy
just believed he was different
flighty maybe
a little girlish
but really really really
sweet
too sweet for the navy²

² Frank X Walker, *Affrilachia*. Lexington, KY: Old Cove, 2000, 22.

Here Walker is not, nor is he intending, to paint an idealized version of Appalachia. His complex portrayal of the region does not always praise inclusion found in the region, but rather begins to simply acknowledge the diversity present. He carefully incorporates dialect and phonetic spelling that mimics jazz and blues music, marrying it to authentic Appalachian speech patterns. His work is “that of the crashing of stereotypes, the mixing of oil and water, the psychological chemistry of racing horses, tobacco, and what it means to be Black, male and artistically inclined in these Kentucky hills” (Finney 214). Now a professor at the University of Kentucky, Walker continues to challenge the white homogeneity of Appalachian representation through his work with the Affrilachian Poets and acting as founder and editor of *PLUCK! The New Journal of Affrilachian Art & Culture*, yet even his claim to Appalachian is often contested. Born in Danville, an area right outside the periphery of Appalachia, many have questioned his right to claim insider status to the region. Kathryn Taylor describes the challenge with bordering Appalachia, “One challenge of conjuring Appalachian identity lies in the façade of the mountains, which attempt to demarcate the physical separation of Appalachia from the rest of the United States. Yet despite this material border, a precise definition of “where Appalachia begins and ends geographically” (Higgs xi) has long been debated” (Taylor). Indeed while many from outside the region accept Frank X’s claim to Appalachia without question, a number of insiders speculate on how much he can credibly speak for the region.

Another prominent contributor to Appalachian complexity is author and Kentucky native Silas House. House has been active in Appalachian literary fiction as an

author and poet since the late 1990s, and is best known for his award winning trilogy: *Clay's Quilt*, *A Parchment of Leaves*, and *Coal Tattoo*. All three of these novels chip away at the homogenous Appalachia that has been painted in pop culture, while at the same time forcing readers to confront a contemporary Appalachia—a side of the region that is rarely seen in representations of the area. Donna Summerlin writes:

Silas House breaks radically with the familiar Appalachian literary convention of focalizing a narrative in the region's nostalgic past. House's multi-generational saga spans the 20th century, gently weaning its audience from images of a mythical Appalachia with connections to poverty, illiteracy and isolation, and shifting to a contemporary scene that is geographically and ethnically distinct but no longer a region of "yesterday's people," as Jack Weller once described it (Summerlin 76).

Indeed, House continually makes references to contemporary music, food, and hobbies in order to slowly shake readers from their romanticized, homogenous and simplified view of the region. Summerlin continues, "His characters are neither uneducated nor impoverished. They are not plagued by perpetual pregnancy, nor are they culturally isolated" (78). Not only does House illustrate a different side to Appalachia, he includes real landmarks from the region throughout the narrative, creating an authentic portrayal for both inside and outside readers. There is a familiarity for the reality of the area, even for those who have not been there in person to experience it.

In addition to bringing an example of temporal diversity with his truly contemporary literary fiction, House is intentional about including examples of ethnic

diversity in Appalachia as well. In *A Parchment of Leaves*, House writes of Vine, a strong female lead of Cherokee heritage, in order to chip away at the presumption that there are few minorities present in the region. When asked about this inclusion in an interview, House commented, “In 1838, the government forced the Cherokee people out of their homeland and put them on the Trail of Tears. What most people don't know is that a lot of Cherokee people escaped or managed to stay behind. Some of them hid out in the mountains and eventually settled near where I'm from. But when I was researching the book, I went down to the Cherokee reservation and conducted interviews. I'm still trying to figure out my family's bloodlines” (Smith). By including distinctions within the Appalachian population, House is able to successfully fracture the mentality of many readers. He is upfront about the divisions present within the Appalachian region and often writes of the superstitions associated with the Cherokee population from other native Appalachians. In *A Parchment of Leaves* House describes the anxiety one of his protagonists have with the Cherokee writing, “Esme had always been ill at ease around the Cherokees. When she saw them in town, she eyes them suspiciously, as if they might snatch her purse or cut her throat for no reason at all” (House 5). Additionally, he creates foils to his protagonists by illuminating the socioeconomic complexity of Appalachia. Unlike the villains represented in *Li'l Abner*, House's characters are not evil because they are primitive, animal-like or uneducated. On the contrary, House's “villains” are exceedingly smart, wealthy and cunning, which allows them a vast amount of power throughout the region, mirroring the authentic

trend nationwide as industrialists began to move into the area. In the prologue to *Parchment of Leaves* House writes:

Tate Masters was the richest man in the nearby town of Black Banks, and he owned all of the land in the head of Redbud Camp. He had decided to build himself a mansion on the mountain's crest. Masters had made it well known that his plan was to run the Cherokees off. The Cherokees demanded that Masters prove he owned the mountain by producing a deed. Their families had settled on Redbud Camp nearly eighty years before, and no one had questioned their claim to the land until now. He made no proof of his ownership, but he didn't have to. None of the clerks or magistrates would hear the Cherokees' complaints. He was left free to build (House 4).

In addition to including diverse peoples throughout his fiction, House's characters also begin to pull apart preexisting myths and conceptions about women in Appalachia. In an interview with Shepherd University, House comments, "I like being part of the dispelling of this myth of the Appalachian woman as an abused, subservient female. I want to present Appalachian women like the ones I have always known: strong, defiant, fearless, boisterous, devout, wild...in short, they are full-fledged human beings, not just some generalization you can put into a little box (Hoffman, 1-2). This effort can be seen in his use of female narrators in both *Parchment of Leaves* and *Coal Tattoo*. In the first chapter of *Coal Tattoo*, House's protagonist Anneth is described as dancing at a bar, only to be abruptly yanked out by her sister Easter. The two argue that she is too young to be in a place like that and that she'll never be able to find a husband if she continues

to be so restless to which Anneth responds, “You think I care about getting a man,” she said smirking. “I don’t want no man” (House 6). From the first chapter, House is setting up a foil to the Daisy Mae character—someone who will relentlessly chase a man until she has him. Anneth doesn’t have an interest in being a wife. Her fierce independence is something absent from the Appalachia stereotype.

Although arguably House’s most celebrated work, *Clay’s Quilt* is narrated by a male, House is intentional about including strong female voices in the narrative. His character Alma, Clay’s love interest throughout the novel, is described as an exceptional fiddle player and strongly independent woman. House writes, “Alma moved among the people like a vapor, easing through the churning mess without ever having to stop or ask to be pardoned. He followed behind closely, straining to keep up, and he felt that he ought to grab her hand or touch the small of her back to help guide her through this confusion, even though she was having a much easier time than he was” (House 99). Here Clay is traversing through a crowd aware of the gender role-reversal, as he is being led by Alma, who requires no help in navigating her direction. The scene is symbolic of the larger message House is sending with his fiction. His Appalachian women are not held up by the men in the narrative, but rather are often the ones illustrating courage, confidence and independence.

Transitioning away from ethnic and socioeconomic complexity, it is important to look at political complexity in the region as well. There is a common understanding that Appalachia is a “red” region, yet there is great history discourse and grass-roots movements all throughout Appalachia that challenge this broad-reaching assumption.

Silas House in particular has received criticism and backlash at times from both Appalachians and outsiders for addressing complexities and divisions openly within the region, in particular regarding mountaintop removal. On February 19, 2011, House was featured in *The New York Times* Op-Ed section for his article entitled, “My Polluted Kentucky Home.” In this editorial he writes, “The news media and the rest of the country typically think of mountaintop removal as an environmental problem. But it’s a human crisis as well, scraping away not just coal but also the freedoms of Appalachian residents, people who have always been told they are of less value than the resources they live above” (House WK11). This remark by House is one key reason why he, as an artist, is able to comment on this particular political and environmental issue. MTR is at its core a human rights issue, as it directly and negatively impacts the residents of Appalachia. While House has gained national attention for his novels, he has always maintained residence in Southeastern Kentucky, using his reputation to step into the role of advocate for the region and continually using personal stories of interactions he has with Appalachian residents to gain traction with the national media. He writes, “More recently, my friend Judy’s grandson was playing in a creek when he was suddenly surrounded by dozens of dead fish. Tests later proved that a coal company was releasing polyacrylamide — a cancer-causing agent used to prepare coal for burning — into the creek. When Judy complained to the state, no one replied. She recently died of brain cancer.”

It is this kind of personal interaction with the victims of MTR that give House a valuable perspective into the dangers of the practice. House also has a lineage that is

forever intertwined with both the region and the coal mining industry, giving him the credibility to walk the careful line between coal-mining opponent and coal miner advocate. In 2009 House co-edited a book entitled, *Something's Rising: Appalachians Fighting Mountaintop Removal*, with fellow Appalachian writer and musician Jason Howard. In the introduction, House writes, "There is plenty of coal-mining pride in my family. But there is another side to living within a place that has to sacrifice itself for the rest of the nation, and to survive" (House and Howard 19). Not only did House grow up in the region, but he also came out of a socioeconomic class that deals directly with those affected by the dangers, both physical and economic, of the coal-mining industry. It is this kind of intimacy that has allowed him to take on the role of credible witness within this discourse, an invaluable asset to those fighting against MTR. Furthermore, one could argue that House himself has been a victim of the practice. He writes, "Around the same time, my father's family home place in Happy Holler, Kentucky was strip-mined, erasing our heritage and causing my aunt's grave to be pushed over into the creek and buried some fifty feet below piles of unwanted topsoil, clay, and low-grade coal—overburden as the industry call it" (House and Howard 19).

In bell hooks' *Belonging: A Culture of Place*, House is quoted as saying, "Coal mining is a part of me...we are not against the coal industry" (Hooks 27). By making himself an advocate for victims, and in many ways a victim himself, House has successfully exempted himself from the specifically political discourse that is often used as a pedestal for politicians to gain traction in Kentucky. He has continually clarified that he is in no way trying to defeat the coal mining industry, but rather is advocating for

regulations that protect the coal miners and the mountains in the region so that his relatives, friends, and colleagues can work and live safely in Southeastern Kentucky through more consistent establishment and enforcement of policies. While House supports the search for new, clean energy sources long term, he has continually stated that for the time being, deep mining is more beneficial to Appalachia and is therefore preferable to strip-mining.

In 2014 Annie Lowrey wrote an article for *The New York Times* entitled, “What’s the Matter with Eastern Kentucky.” In that article she writes, “It’s coal country, but perhaps in name only. In the first quarter of this year, just 54 people were employed in coal mining in Clay County, a precipitous drop from its coal-production peak in 1980. That year, about 2.5 million tons of coal were taken out of the ground in Clay; this year, the county has produced a fraction of that — just over 38,000 tons” (Lowrey MM13). House responded to Lowrey’s article in *The Courier Journal* where he writes:

As an economics reporter for *The New York Times*, Lowrey needs to understand that great economic reporting should be about more than statistics. A reporter like Lowrey should know that Appalachia has been pushed down again and again throughout our nation's history. During the period after the Civil War, many mountain counties in Southern Appalachian states were punished because of their lack of loyalty to the Confederacy. This resulted in politicians not providing those mountain counties with funding for bridges, roads and schools until extractive industry demanded those things (House).

While House may not be well-versed in every political move that has been made in Appalachia, he has a foothold in the history as well as the media portrayal of the region and is begging for more context and complexity in its coverage. He is able to continually and successfully use this foothold to inspire Kentuckians to push back against the broad generalizations that are swept across national newspapers, hence why his response was featured in the Louisville newspaper and was not published as a response in the *New York Times*. He goes on to explain how even as an insider, he has faced scrutiny for discussing issues like MTR. He writes, "I'll use myself as an example here. Because of my outspokenness on the problems created by Big Coal, I've been called a traitor to my own people. I am proud to be from a coal mining family, but that pride comes from the hard work done by the miners, not an allegiance to the companies that became rich on their backs. Nothing makes me sadder than when I see my own people being fiercely loyal to the corporations that have hurt us over and over." (House).

Silas House has been instrumental for the Appalachian region through both his fictional work and his writer-activist stance on the complex issue of MTR. His work at its most fundamental level is intended to give dignity back to a people that have either been consistently looked over or romanticized. Through slowly introducing readers to an authentic contemporary Appalachia, House is able to slowly allow readers to deconstruct their own perceptions about Appalachia, most often painted by those from outside of the region. Additionally, he has continued to use those connections and new perceptions to form a platform for the injustices occurring throughout the region. House has consistently used his voice and authority within the Appalachian region to advocate

to insiders and outsiders alike who, thanks to his novels, are aware of what a complex, contemporary Appalachia looks like.

Finally, it is important to address individual complexity within the region. While there may be common threads that unite the Appalachian people, they are still individuals. High schools in Appalachia are far from homogenous. This kind of complexity present in the region is captured in the 2013 award-winning novel *Trampoline* by Robert Gipe. *Trampoline* follows the story of high school student Dawn Jewell as she navigates high school, her extended family, and her Grandmother Cora's resistance to the coal companies and mountaintop removal. *Trampoline* was groundbreaking for several reasons, one of which was its form. Gipe breaks up the prose of the novel with a collection of his own illustrations, creating a hybrid between a traditional novel and the graphic novels and comic books that he has claimed were "his earliest influence" (Edwards). The combination of images, text bubbles, and prose add a dynamic quality to the work, with the content almost spilling from page to page, seamlessly blending the different sections. In addition to its form, the characters are some of the most complex characters seen in recent Appalachian fiction. Silas House offers his take on the character development in the novel in a review writing:

Dawn Jewell is one of the most memorable and endearing narrators I have ever read. She's like a combination of Scout Finch, Huck Finn, Holden Caulfield, and True Grit's Mattie Ross, but even more she is completely her own person, the creation of Robert Gipe, an author who has given us a novel that provides everything we need in great fiction: a sense of place that drips with kudzu and

coal dust; complex characters who rise up off the page as living, breathing people we will not soon forget; and a rollicking story that is by turns hilarious, profound, deeply moving, and always lyrically beautiful. (House).

Dawn herself writes “I was a freak, soft and four-eyed, with black fingernail polish, a dead daddy, a drunk momma, a crackhead brother, outlaw uncles, and divorced grandparents who made trouble for normal people every time they come off the ridge” (Gipe). While this description certainly sounds like the characters in *Li'l Abner*, it soon becomes clear that Dawn's candid, often blunt descriptions are more a reflection of her own personality and perceptions and as the novel progresses the reader is able to see the complexity associated with each of these characters, including Dawn herself. In some ways, Gipe sets the reader up with many of the stereotypes of the Appalachian reader seemingly only to then break them down and rewrite them through the voice of his fierce protagonist. Lisa Peet of *Library Journal* writes, “Gipe deftly avoids every single cliché that could trip such a story up, which includes having a pitch-perfect ear for dialect and making it into something marvelous” (Peet).

Robert Gipe was born in North Carolina in 1963 and raised in Kingsport Tennessee. He moved to Kentucky and began working for Appalshop in 1989 as the marketing and educational services director, an experience he credits with piquing his interest in oral history (Chaney). In 1997 he became Director of the Appalachian Studies Program at Southeast Community and Technical College in Harlan, Kentucky. When he began work on his first novel *Trampoline* he mentioned that to narrow in on his approach, he utilized the Hindman Settlement School, a resource widely used for

Appalachian authors working on poetry, fiction, and non-fiction (Edwards). It is this exposure to scholars, students, and residents of Appalachia that allows Gipe to lend an authentic voice to his characters. Candace Chaney of *The Herald Leader* writes:

"I've probably listened to hundreds of hours of oral histories," Gipes says of the almost 400 first-person stories that have been collected so far. Gipe says the oral histories did more than further refine his ear for regional language; they provided insights into the subject's inner lives, which helped with the formation of Dawn's first-person narration. "I became fascinated by what people tell and what they don't tell and how they protect themselves," says Gipe. "It's as much about how you talk as how you write."

Unlike many of House's protagonists, Dawn pushes readers even further into contemporary Appalachia with the way she dresses, her language, and her hobbies, despite the setting in 1998. Unlike even some of House's characters, she doesn't quilt or farm. She dyes her hair different colors and listens to punk rock, yet she is still a part of Canard County as much as it is a part of her. Furthermore, Gipe does not leave out the real issues plaguing the region of Appalachia. Within Dawn's family Gipe represents addiction to painkillers, thievery and even violence, yet his approach to representing this characters is refreshingly new. Rather than defending or justifying their actions to the reader, or otherwise vilifying them, he simply creates them. Dawn's mother steals money from her and her grandmother and tried to get a prescription for painkillers after Dawn is injured, yet she is not a character who invokes hatred or fear from readers. Gipe is able to successfully lend his characters agency and depth, which makes them

complex and relatable, and most importantly, redeemable. At times they make cringe-worthy decisions and at times they do almost heroic things, and most importantly, the reader is with them not as a voyeur, but as a participant. In other words, the reader is not hearing about Canard County, they are experiencing it through Gipe's novel.

Perhaps the best example of this comes in Dawn's Uncle Hubert. While at times his actions can be abhorrent, his redeeming quality is how much he cares for Dawn and her mother. He encourages Dawn to sell moonshine, but also insists on taking responsibility when Dawn crashes a car she was illegally driving. He is responsible for the death of a man, but one could argue he did it to save Dawn's mother from falling deeper into a codependent, addictive relationship. He is in many ways the dark knight of the novel, not helping to proactively promote good, but fiercely protective of his circle.

In Chapter 9, Dawn and her Uncle Hubert go looking for Dawn's mother, who has run off presumably on a drug binge. They begin driving in the snow, with Hubert regularly reassuring Dawn she's doing a good job. Eventually Dawn's mother's boyfriend Keith Kelly begins tailing them, regularly hitting their bumper to try to intimidate Dawn and run her off of the road. At one point, he bumps the car so hard that their car turns sideways and Keith's car runs into a ditch. Hubert immediately goes to Dawn as Gipe writes, "He opened my door, which gapped with a creak, and put one hard hand out to me, red and wet in the falling powder. I let him lead me" (Gipe 182). He worked hard to get Keith out of his wrecked car, and as he went Dawn heard a "pop" and Keith was gone. It is made obvious to the reader that Hubert broke Keith's neck, but it is unknown whether or not it was intentional, or just an accident as he was trying to pry him from

the car. This scene really encapsulates the complexity with Hubert. The reader is never really told whether he is a good person who does bad things, or whether he is a bad person who does bad things, and in this instance, Dawn isn't sure either. You're experiencing the same questions she is as she reflects, "I stood there staring at Hubert with my mouth hanging open. The snow fell on both of us. I stood there thinking: if it wasn't Hubert killed Keith, it was me" (183).

The same kind of complexity can be seen with Dawn's mother. Perhaps the most revealing scene comes in Chapter 6, when Dawn comes home to find her mother, who had obviously been doing drugs. She thinks, "I looked around for something. I don't know what. Something to give Momma, I guess. A pillow? She looked like a person needed a pillow. She had bruises on her neck and her bumpy blue wrists" (108). The idea that even in this state, Dawn is still trying to find a way to comfort her mother, rather than react with anger evokes a very compassionate response from readers. The scene continues with Dawn's mother asking her about the first day of school the following day and then quickly suggesting that they have to dye her hair green to "Show them they ain't broke you" (111). While Dawn doesn't want to dye her hair green, it is made obvious to the reader that this special attention from her mother is rare and deeply important to Dawn, and for that reason she allows her hair to be bleached, shaved, and dyed. At one point the bleach on her scalp starts to burn prompting her to remind her mom to wash it off as she remarks, "this sounds stupid, but it felt religious the way she rubbed on my head with them rubber gloves" (117). When finally the process was complete, Gipe writes, "Momma dried my hair, and I was glad for the noise.

I threw off the cape, which was smothering me. My hair was dyed and Jan and Momma sat back satisfied, like two jungle cats after they've eat their full of wildebeest. They sat there smoking cigarettes, eating missionary cookies. I stood up to leave" (118). The vulnerability that Dawn someone allows with her mother is so far from the hardness she expresses with nearly everyone else. You can tell from this scene that in many ways Dawn has been forced to grow up so early, but in other ways she is still very much a young girl desperate for her mother's approval. Likewise, her mother is showing her attention in the only way she knows how. She is a destructive personality who doesn't know how to be there for Dawn, so she flips between treating her like a friend and like an authority figure to whom she has to defend her actions and behaviors. The dye itself is incredibly symbolic for her relationship with her mother. It starts out with what are perhaps good intentions, but slowly begins to burn, causing pain and discomfort until finally Dawn is forced out into the cold air alone to escape it. These scenes demonstrate incredibly complex characters that are impossible to characterize.

It is also important to note that like House, Gipe addresses mountaintop removal in his novel, shedding light on the grassroots activism that comes from inside the area. This subject is at times heartbreaking with Dawn consistently being confronted with "Coal Keeps the Lights on" stickers and feeling alienated from her peers due to her Grandmother Cora's initiatives, but just as Dawn struggles with this complexity, so do the readers. Cora knows that what she is doing is not always well received and is at times misconstrued as acting against coal miners who risk their life daily, and Gipe does an exceptionally eloquent job at balancing the sides of the debate while remaining true

to the prejudices taking place in the region. Dawn does not want her mountain to be leveled, yet she is forced to balance her mother's addiction, teenage love, her own identity and her place in the community and for that reason cannot be as passionately focused on the case like her grandmother.

Carter Sickels offers his take on *Trampoline* in his review writing, "Gipe is funny but not cynical, and compassionate without falling into sentimentality. Even when Dawn longs for a simpler time, the nostalgic yearning isn't cloying or sentimental" (Sickels). This careful balance that Gipe is able to achieve can arguably only come from spending a significant amount of time in the region. It is clear he was careful to avoid the homogeneity that so often accompanies Appalachian representation, while also remaining authentic to the region. Part of this is accomplished through his drawings. His representation of Dawn often shows her as masculine and serious—a dramatic departure from Daisy Duke and Daisy Mae Scragg [Figure 8]. Dawn sports a green Mohawk at one point in the novel, cursing regularly and always inserting her own version of dark humor into the plotlines. The drawings themselves are not clean and colorful like the many drawings that decorated Appalachian comic books, but rather monochromatic and hurried, like they could move off the page directly under the eye of the reader. Dawn is also decisive and strong, with her words often in bold or all capitalized letters. In this way, Gipe is pulling from his oral tradition history, including not just what she says, but making an important note about *how* she says it. In many of the drawings, her mouth is obscured in some way from either an object, the frame of the illustration or the text itself, further reinforcing the importance of the text as her

voice. While there are still some who will argue that *Trampoline* unfairly portrays Appalachia in a negative light, a careful reading reveals that the love and complexity of the character's situations far outweigh their shortcomings. The context and character development Gipe is able to provide will help to reform outside readers' views of the region and its very real problems and people.

While comic strips like *Li'l Abner* are intentionally one-dimensional, they have contributed to the very real homogeneous view of Appalachia in pop culture for decades. Starting with vaudeville theatre, Appalachia is most often stereotyped as poor, lazy and white. Even when counter-images emerge the stereotype changes to something akin to the "noble savage," the mountaineer who demonstrates a return to the frontier way of life. This counter image is often equally damaging for the region of Appalachia, as it is romanticized and still encourages Appalachia to be seen as the cultural "other." As Silas House writes, "People have one of two stereotypes about this place: they think it's either 'beautiful and simple' or 'stupid and simple'" (Satterwhite 1). In order to help deconstruct these damaging stereotypes, Appalachia authors have incorporated ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, temporal, political, and individual diversity into their work so that readers can begin to relate to the characters and settings in a way they could not with Local Color writers and comic strips. Frank X uses poetry to engage and inform audiences about growing up black in Appalachia, reinforcing the notion that there are ethnic minorities in the region and bringing to light the problems that often accompany that identity. Silas House continues this in his novels, particularly *Parchment of Leaves* where he describes the Cherokee population in Appalachia, a

demographic that is often overlooked and in actuality have a longer history in Appalachia than the Irish and Scottish immigrants that would come decades later. House also focuses on specific issues beyond poverty that engage and challenge the Appalachian people on a daily basis. He confronts the issue of Appalachian Mountaintop Removal both in his creative work and as an author-advocate himself. Finally, Robert Gipe uses his illustrated novel *Trampoline* to rewrite the role of the young heroine in Appalachian fiction, replacing stereotypes like Daisy Duke with the fierce voice of Dawn Jewell. Additionally, he creates a work that follows the very real issues in Appalachia, but lends agency to his characters. Through making them complex—the issues then, too become complex, breaking down the simplistic view of the region outline by authors like Annie Lowrey. All of these authors grew up in Appalachia and for that reason are able to write about the complexity in the region with authentic voices, focusing on the people and their intentions. Elizabeth Fine describes this transition from romanticized or criticized Appalachia to a real Appalachia, “Looking at the theme from many angles, Green raises questions about who has the authority to write about Appalachia and the rift between insiders and outsiders of the region over its portrayal. Moving from the politics of *who* studies Appalachia to *what* is studied Green challenges us to push our history of mountain images back before the Local Color movement and industrialization to the European antecedents of Appalachian culture” (Fine 2). In other words, readers must be challenged to abandon the idealized version of Appalachia and begin to look at it as a part of our shared collective past. Emily Satterwhite describes the Appalachian complexity in writing, “My concern is not with the accuracy or inaccuracy of any given

novel, to paraphrase Doug Reichert Powell, but with the lack of a wide enough variety of stories to capture the complexity of Appalachian places and experiences” (Satterwhite 210). The examples discussed above from native Appalachian writers begin to widen the genre of “Appalachian fiction” by addressing this issue of complexity directly and capturing peoples, places and issues that have not been engaged in literature or pop culture before.

Chapter Four: Getting the Whole Story: The Importance of Context

Appalachia has long been a favored subject for photographers who, like Shelby Lee Adams, are drawn to rural pockets whose grittiness translates well into the photographic medium. This medium in particular is problematic when it comes to providing sufficient context, the fourth and final chapter of this dissertation. Appalachians have continually expressed frustration with the lack of explanation for why problems like illiteracy continually plague the area. Photographers and even documentarians often work to show the conditions in some areas of Appalachia, but many neglect to answer the question of how those pockets came to exist. What social, economic and political structures have been implemented or dismantled and how has that directly contributed to and affected the situation being documented? Perhaps the best example of this is the continual representations of toothlessness in the region. Without appropriate context, viewers of the toothless mountaineer are left to assume their condition is exclusively a result of a bad diet and inadequate dental care. A condition known as “Mountain Dew Mouth” has now become synonymous with the Appalachian region. Pepsi, the owner of Mountain Dew, released a statement in response to this epidemic arguing that it is impossible to blame such an issue on a product, and that we should instead look at individual habits and lifestyles as being the primary culprit in poor oral health (Gray and Diaz 13).

What Pepsi neglected to mention was that Mountain Dew was created in Tennessee and was originally marketed using “Willie the Hillbilly” in an attempt to

capitalize on the success and popularity of the *Beverly Hillbillies* (Harkins 200) [Figure 9]. Priscilla Harris, an associate professor at the Appalachian College of Law, provides much needed context to help address the issue of Mountain Dew Mouth while identifying the underlying causes for its popularity (Barclay). She points first to the quality of the drinking water in Appalachia. Dubious environmental practices often contaminate the drinking water in the region, leading residents to rely on sodas for themselves and their children, rather than trust their own tap water. Additionally, Mountain Dew is often used as a kind of anti-depressant, giving much-needed energy to miners working underground and to students, who will drink it throughout the school day. The high sugar content and caffeine are highly addictive, making it even more difficult for Appalachians to successfully quit the habit. Finally in many areas of Appalachia there is little access to dental care, making it harder to educate on the severity of the situation and detect and diagnose early (Harris 53). Without politicians and corporations willing to shoulder some of the responsibility, viewers are left without context and are forced to assume it is Appalachian ignorance that has led to such an epidemic. Finally, the long-term repercussions of this epidemic are often ignored. Dana Singer from the Mid-Ohio Valley Health Department comments on this:

There's a huge economic impact. You see 20-year-olds with their front teeth rotted out. What kind of job can they get? Even getting into college can be a problem. If you have an admissions interview and all of your teeth are rotted out, that takes a toll. The situation also impacts a worker's productivity. If they're in pain, if they can't brush their teeth, the agony of dental pain is so distracting

that workers would have to be absent and take breaks and lose their concentration or ability to work if their mouth is not healthy. And now we also know that heart disease is linked to poor oral health (PHLR Annual Meeting).

When the full context is provided, one can better see how something that has been minimized to toothless, ignorant “hillbillies” has so negatively affected the economic development and potential in the region. Additionally, context can encourage viewers to look at the larger systematic causes of this epidemic and help prevent them from relying on short-term solutions and simple victim blaming.

The negative repercussions from a lack of context extend into fictional representations as well. Perhaps the most damaging example comes from the novel and subsequent film *Deliverance* by author James Dickey and director John Boorman. While the importance of the novel both as a stand-alone contribution and as inspiration for the film cannot be understated, for the purpose of this dissertation I will be focusing on the film adaptation of the novel. An Academy Award nominee, *Deliverance* tells the story of four Atlanta friends who venture into the wilderness of North Georgia for a canoeing trip. The men have varying levels of experience and expertise confronting the elements and are forced to venture off their path when the turbulent water separates their two canoes. Throughout the story the men are confronted by a number of “locals” to the area, with two pivotal scenes in particular standing the test of time for viewers and readers. The first of these scenes comes near the beginning of the film while the men are making final preparations for their journey. One of the Atlanta men, Drew, is playing an acoustic guitar, catching the attention of a young boy, presumably an

Appalachian “native,” who joins him with his banjo. The two begin to play together, slowly increasing the pace and complexity of the music as they go, while physically drawing nearer to one another. When the playing concludes, Drew approaches the boy and tries to shake his hand, but is met with an abrupt dismissal from the boy who quickly turns away from him. Drew seems puzzled by this rather sudden communication breakdown but merely shrugs his shoulders, and the men continue on their journey.

It is important to first point out that the boy himself appears to suffer from some kind of developmental disability. There is no explanation to this point about why that decision was made and the film later shows more rural Georgia natives with varying degrees of developmental disabilities. Without appropriate context viewers could assume this is a result of inbreeding, or any other number of environmental factors. In many ways the boy’s refusal to shake Drew’s hand would indicate that he is either aware of and acknowledges his more primitive state of being when compared to the customs and habits of the men’s “modern” world, or he simply has no prior exposure to these customs and is unsure of how to interact. Emily Satterwhite writes:

Deliverance readers sought both titillation and reassurance from Dickey’s premise that Appalachia permitted primitivism to endure in the modern world. Fans credited both authors with intimate knowledge of mountain people and with documentary accuracy in their representations—with only a rare complaint directed at Dickey. Readers’ faith in Marshall’s and Dickey’s right relation to their settings—which both authors cannily claimed for the sake of marketing—was key to the novels’ fabrication of authenticity (Satterwhite 133).

One of these “rare complaints” directed at Dickey and Boorman came from film critic Roger Ebert who wrote, “It's possible to consider civilized men in a confrontation with the wilderness without throwing in rapes, cowboy-and-Indian stunts and pure exploitative sensationalism” (Ebert). Ebert touches on an important component of *Deliverance* in his review, pointing out that the Appalachian natives are very much an extension of the brutal, untamed wilderness. They, like the river, are aggressive, unpredictable, out-of-control, and unforgiving. While one can see how Dickey and Boorman were using these extensions to intensify the plot, it is clear that few considerations were made to the long-term repercussions it would have for Appalachians, especially for audiences who were unaware of the characters’ symbolic nature. Anthony Harkins writes, “Lewis’s story and much of the novel is loosely based on events from Dickey’s life, particularly his canoeing trips on the Coosawattee River in the North Georgia wilderness with his friends, Al Braselton and Lewis King, and their encounters with the mountain folks who lived near its banks” (Harkins 207). The representation of this interaction plays out very differently in Dickey’s novel and Boorman’s film, bringing me to the second and perhaps most pivotal scene of the film. After the canoes are separated, Bobby and Ed are left stranded and come upon two locals, who due to their appearance, are immediately recognized as sinister and predatory threats, at times even snarling at the “prey” that stumbled into their trap. The two men begin to berate and taunt the men before eventually tying up Ed. Ultimately one of the men rapes Bobby while exclaiming the now-infamous line, “squeal like a pig,” before he is suddenly killed by Lewis, who had snuck up through the woods during the

commotion. Harkins writes of Dickey's real-life encounter on such a canoeing trip, "Dickey and his party wrecked their canoe and were rescued by a teenage boy, Lucas Gentry, and his father Ira. Once convinced that the outsiders were not revenue agents, the Gentry's brought them to their rustic country house where they offered them cool water, sugarcane, and jars of moonshine" (Harkins 207).

It is interesting that in his real-life canoeing encounter, Dickey was rescued by two local men and in his fictional adaptation, his characters are brutalized by them. Keen Butterworth argues that Bobby's fate is directly related to his career in the "civilized" world. As a salesman who has little knowledge of the most basic survival skills, he engages only with the industrialized world and has underestimated the preparation needed to engage with nature. Butterworth remarks on his "softness" arguing that it is this quality that ultimately makes him the sacrificial lamb in this film and the victim of the "gratuitous evil" of the two mountaineers (Butterworth 73).

Dickey clearly had motives beyond the autobiographical when he set out to create *Deliverance* yet these have been and continue to be overshadowed by the brutality present in the film. Harkins alludes to with the rape scene writing, "Given this singularly degrading connotation meant to evoke the unquestioned superiority of modern urbanity, it is not surprising that James Dickey's far more ambiguous interpretation in his novel of the mountaineers and the price of 'progress' was later often forgotten" (Hawkins 206). Michael Glenday points to an early interview with Dickey to argue that Dickey's "ambiguous interpretation" of *Deliverance* is really a commentary about stamina and humans' inability to adapt in a modern world. He

asserts that Ed Gentry is meant to encompass the resiliency needed to survive in a “hostile environment” thus explaining why he is ultimately the hero of the film (Glenday 149). In other words, not unlike Al Capp, Dickey wanted to engage the dangers of urban life and society’s inability to recognize or confront humanity’s natural state. He used, as have so many before him, the Appalachian people as symbols for a return to the primitive—embodiments of “the natural.” As Glenday continues, he points out the problem with Dickey’s intentions, “Certainly Dickey’s assertion runs contrary to the critical consensus which assumes that we have in the same novel a subversion of civilized values, values which are largely eclipsed by the primitive strain in human nature. In other words, rather than seeing in *Deliverance* a call to resist the draw towards urban comforts and environments, viewers are more likely to see it as a cautionary tale warning against the dangers of an untamed, uncivilized, primitive wilderness” (Glenday 149).

These representations are particularly damaging when one considers the lack of an attempt at context in the film. Beyond the fact that the four men’s encounter was fictional, there was never any explanation for why Dickey’s natives were hostile or aggressive towards the men. Neither Dickey nor Boorman lends any explanation for the behavior of the two aggressors, or for the behavior of any of the “locals” in the film. Harkins addresses this lack of context in regards to the rape scene writing, “Dickey presents this action not as an aberration but a pattern of mountaineer behavior, for Ed thinks as his captors tie him to a tree just before they assault Bobby, ‘they must have done this before; it was not a technique they would have just thought of for the

occasion" (Harkins 207). Dickey was not present on set as much as his son Christopher, who in a memoir, wrote about his experience in the production of *Deliverance*. He discusses the issues on set with the rape scene in particular writing:

That night I called my father. I was sick of the film, sick of the whole story. And I wondered why the hell he had to have this homosexual rape. "I had to put the moral weight of murder on the suburbanites," was what my father told me. It was what he always said. He had to portray the mountain men as such monsters that the suburbanites would decide not only to kill, but to try to cover up their crime. [...]In the movie—it was becoming what the movie was about, it was the thing everybody was going to remember. "Squeal like a pig!" Not Lewis's survivalism, not the climb up the cliff, not Ed's conquest of his own fear. It was all going to be about butt-fucking. "You're wrong, son," my father said (Dickey 180).

Christopher Dickey goes on to discuss the fear that he and his fellow film-makers were experiencing as word began to spread to the Georgia locals about what the movie was going to include (Dickey 180). Christopher Dickey was afraid, and acutely aware of the impact that this portrayal was going to have on the surrounding area and the larger Appalachian region. It is also similarly clear that his father was not thinking along those terms as he continued to push the story through without any changes and did not share the same fear that his son did actually residing in the region for an extended amount of time. Christopher's Dickey's observation would of course prove to be correct, as "squeal like a pig" has remained married to Appalachian representation since the production of

the film. What Dickey was intending to use merely as props for his larger intention overshadowed everything else and has become perhaps the most damaging representation of Appalachians to date.

In addition to the brutality of the scene, the circulation and popularity of the film has helped cement it in the mind of American pop culture. The novel sold over 1.8 million copies and the film grossed over 46 million dollars. It was nominated by the Academy for Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Award for Film Editing. Satterwhite writes, “The reception of both novels illuminates the white high middlebrow readers’ reinvention of home, place and innocence during US imperialist militarism and civil rights activism” (Satterwhite 23). It is this lasting presence in the American psyche that has led to a greater acceptance of casual, damaging references to the “primitive” perception of Appalachian people. Dwight Billings includes an excerpt from *Rock and Ice* Magazine describing the Red River Gorge in the Daniel Boone National Forest, “We drove by clumps of locals who eyed us with smoldering hostility. Hollywood could not have made these guys up. They were the sorriest looking dudes I’ve ever seen. As I pulled in to the trailhead, I noticed Ray’s truck wasn’t behind me. We waited awhile, hoping they hadn’t broken down in front of the cast of *Deliverance*” (Billings 4). This comment in particular is remarkable because simply by referencing the film, this contributor is acknowledging that Hollywood actually can and has “made these guys up.” Rather than seeing locals in a fresh context, viewers see locals who fit similar physical and geographical characteristics in the lens of *Deliverance*, inciting fear and even in some ways the uncanny as they are warped back to a more primitive time that Dickey would

argue their urban personas are unfamiliar and unprepared for. Dickey himself was given the privilege of experiencing the hospitality of the Appalachian people as he found himself stranded in unfamiliar terrain, yet he has essentially stripped this opportunity from subsequent viewers and readers. In regards to the reaction from the area represented, Henry Hart writes, "The most hostile reaction to the film came from the area around the film site itself. Many residents in Clayton and surrounding towns reacted to the film as they had reacted to the book" (Hart). Daniel Roper summarized their views in the *North Georgia Journal*: "Unfortunately the movie...portrayed the long-dwelling mountain families as dirty, backward, violent, and unfriendly. *Deliverance* did for them what *Jaws* did for sharks. Aware that his film had made him even more of a persona non grata in North Georgia, Dickey complained: 'I can't go over in those counties now. I'm afraid somebody is going to shoot me because they said I portrayed all mountain people as degenerate sodomists and it's given them a bad name'" (Hart). It is clear that Dickey did not fully recognize, or else did not care about the larger implications for the people he was using as props to communicate his larger intention with *Deliverance*. The lack of context and overall portrayal of the region has only further reinforced the hostility that Appalachians often feel when outsiders come in to represent the region. In this case, there were many local families who participated in the film and were friendly and courteous hosts for the cast and crew, not realizing how poorly the final product would portray them. In this way, Dickey, an Atlanta native, was wise to avoid the area up until his death in 1997, as regional families could view any

additional exposure he experienced as potentially even more damaging than what he had already published through his novel and the subsequent film.

Less sinister but equally damaging are the “social crusaders” outlined by Elizabeth Engelhardt. These “social crusaders” would go into Appalachia in an effort to document the conditions, but would often leave viewers with little to no context to help educate about how the subjects came to be in the conditions shown. The first example comes from CBS news in 1965. It was a special program called “Christmas in Appalachia” and it outlined how “Appalachians” in Eastern Kentucky were experiencing Christmas that year. Betty Bowler argues that this is how the press continually missteps—by continuing to place blame on what it felt was the “root of the problem,” being the people themselves. Bowler maintains that “Christmas in Appalachia” had the most “far-reaching effect of any of the mass media presentations of Appalachia that year” (Bowler 244). Throughout the documentary, Kurlalt pushes for the details that will be profound for a mass audience, without the economic research to provide sufficient background. He interviews a coal miner who has several children, with one more on the way. The interview is detailed below:

Kurlalt: How many children were there in your family?

Johnson: There was fifteen. There was ten boys and five girls.

Kurlalt: How much education did your brothers and sisters get?

Johnson: Well, I went through the fourth grade and I think that was the highest either one of them went. The rest of them stopped along the second or third.

Kuralt: Do you hope for more for your children?

Johnson: I certainly do. That's the reason I'm trying to go on day by day just working now and then in these mines, while they're going to grow up and not get an education. That's the one reason I'm so interested in this vocational thing. If I can get a skill, and a good job then I know they're going to get a good education. And if they get a good education they can do a lot better than we did- 'cause they'll be able to get a job.

Kuralt: How will you do on Christmas Day? (Kuralt)

In his last comment, Johnson discusses vocational training, the unreliability of the mining industry, and the issues with the education system, but rather than reporting on those issues, Kuralt asks about what Christmas will look like in his home that year. This is an example of how Kuralt and CBS were and did not illustrate an interest in identifying the issues that have led to "Christmas in Appalachia," but rather are primarily interested in the sensationalism of the conditions themselves. This kind of "social crusader" has a tendency also to consistently group all of Appalachia together rather than identifying community-specific problems and resolutions. Henry Shapiro writes:

By the middle teens, even many of the denominational agencies at work in Appalachia had begun to think of the mountain region as a region, with needs peculiar to itself, and to consider their work in the context of a larger effort at social reconstruction throughout the mountains. As a result, assertions of the legitimacy of Appalachian otherness, which had functioned exclusively as a means of resolving the intellectual dilemma posed by the existence of the

strange land and peculiar people and as a defense of mountain white work, now began to function as the basis for action in benevolence (Shapiro 214-215).

One can see how this idea continues even into contemporary “snapshots” into the region. Following the formula outlined by Kuralt, in 2009 journalist Diane Sawyer, a native of Glasgow Kentucky, ventured into Eastern Kentucky for an ABC 20/20 special entitled, “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.” The title itself is problematic when considering Shapiro’s position. The idea that Appalachia is somehow “hidden” from the rest of America confirms its otherness, and children of the “mountains” groups the region together as some kind of anomaly among the otherwise consistently “American” landscape. Sawyer and ABC’s approach was strikingly similar to Kuralt in that they continually exposed the conditions present, without any attention paid to the context behind those conditions. Throughout the report, Sawyer follows four children: a football player who has his hopes set on playing in college, a little girl whose mother is battling a drug addiction, a pre-teen who is living out of a suitcase with 11 relatives, and an eighteen year old coal-miner whose girlfriend is pregnant. Presumably as an attempt to counter these heartbreaking stories, the report also highlights efforts in the region to push back against the issues present. They interview the owner of a mobile dental office and a health clinic owner, yet do not provide the historical background on why those services are so important to and necessary for the region, and why these are individuals rather than organizations having to take up the charge. Sawyer mentions that Mountain Dew “seems to be used as a kind of anti-depressant,” but doesn’t elaborate on why a teenager in high school might need such an antidepressant in this area or why they’re

using soda as an alternative to medicine. In this context she does not address the lack of access to holistic, consistent healthcare, transportation and other essential resources that help promote a healthy community.

The reaction to this special program has been mixed, with many feeling frustrated about another missed opportunity to provide much needed context for the Appalachia region on a national platform. *The Lexington Herald Leader* collected many of those responses in their article, "Eastern Kentuckians mixed on '20/20' report." They include commentary from Appalshop director Art Menius who feels that attention is given to Appalachia only when they produce stories that have the greatest reach in terms of "pulling heartstrings," while at the same time missing the larger picture (Meehan and Copley). Others like longtime Hazard mayor Bill Gorman were more outspoken in their criticism describing it as, "The same load of crap they've been doing for 40 years." Silas House commented, "I was hoping for a fair and complex look at Appalachia. She did a beautiful job introducing it, stating she was a Kentuckian and that Americans had these stereotypes and she hoped they would dismiss those stereotypes and look at the complexity of the issues." Finally you have Derek Mullins, the then-chair of the executive board for Appalshop, who perhaps summarizes in stating, "The camera doesn't lie, but it also doesn't tell the whole story."

It would seem Sawyer, despite perhaps her intentions reiterated much of the essentialism present in Appalachian rhetoric, rather than introducing new information to help inform and educate viewers. Appalachian scholar Mary Anglin elaborates, "Appalachian gold," was the term Sawyer used to characterize pain medications

circulating, at great profit through an underground economy. Catchy phrases like this—and there are a number—perform the reductive work of any stereotype” (Anglin 139). She summarizes in writing, “For those of us engaged in Appalachian studies, such approaches—their erasure of social heterogeneity, neglect of political economic context, and disregard for health inequities—have a familiarity and a history dating to the settlement schools and missionizing efforts of the early twentieth century and the media accounts of the century prior” (140).

One of the most outspoken supporters for the inclusion of appropriate context is West Virginia author and advocate Denise Giardina. In an effort to rewrite the narrative of Appalachia, in particular the injustices associated with the coal industry, Giardina has published a series of novels including *Storming Heaven* (1987) and *The Unquiet Earth* (1992). In *Storming Heaven*, Giardina uses deliberate literary techniques to help give readers a holistic look at the situation in Appalachia, thus helping them to confront the “otherness” that is so often associated with the region. Terry Easton summarizes Giardina’s intention, “For Giardina, Appalachian ‘otherness’ rests on the belief that Appalachians are solely responsible for their poverty, that they are ‘simple throwbacks to the past, inhabitants of a land time forgot, lazy and shiftless, quick-tempered and ready to grab a gun to settle differences” (Easton 151). To begin diffusing this “otherness,” in *Storming Heaven* Giardina uses familial divisions, diverse narrators and a dismantlement of traditional gender roles in order to lend context to the reader- helping them to see the characters individual trajectories and perhaps more importantly, how they arrived there. Her primary protagonist is Carrie Bishop, a nurse whose grit

consistently allows her to take on traditionally male roles throughout the novel.

Giardina also writes the voice of Rondal Lloyd, a coal miner and union organizer, CJ Marcum, an activist for the miners, and Rosa Angelelli, an Italian immigrant whose four sons die tragically in a coal mining disaster.

Carrie and her brother Miles are consistently at odds as he leaves to attend Berea College and returns to run the coal mine, at times believing that it is this industry that will help lead Appalachia towards substantial progress. Raymond Williams addresses this familial tension between Carrie and Miles, “The family is an epitome of political struggle, and the conflicting versions and affiliations of that struggle are represented not only generally—in the events of the lockout and the struggles in the Miners Federation and between parties—but inside the family” (Williams 220). As Williams points out, in this dynamic Miles is in many ways assuming the role of the “outsider,” and in this case perhaps the most dangerous kind of outsider. By leaving and returning he becomes a kind of pseudo-absentee mine boss, and believes truly that he is helping Appalachia towards industrialized progress. Through this assumption, however, he is reasserting his intellectual superiority over the Appalachian people who he believes do not understand their own best interest. Miles even resides in a mansion that oversees the camps, further reinforcing his “bird’s-eye view” of the issues below. Carrie however, is in the trenches and sees things from an “insider’s” perspective. She is able to witness first-hand the damage inflicted on individual miners and their families, making it impossible for her to advocate for the same agenda as Miles.

Giardina builds these symbolic relationships with Miles and Carrie representing many of the divisions within Appalachia, and the larger regional problems mirroring national issues. Kim Gillespie argues, "*Storming Heaven* is a national allegory of the 1980s to the degree that the lives of individual characters represent the combative social relations of the decade, understood not as isolated experiences or events but as constitutive of the national identity" (Gillespie 104). She goes on to cite two main examples from the text to support her argument. First, Giardina's inclusion not only of the coal camps, but how the Appalachian families got there. Many families were experiencing success in their agrarian lifestyle, but were forced off their land, as was C.J. Marcum, whose father was murdered after refusing to sign away his farm's mineral rights. Second, Gillespie points to Giardina's ability to illustrate solidarity of different races, genders and classes under the threat of colonization. In this way Gillespie is comparing the coal companies to foreign forces, drawing a parallel between Native Americans and British colonization. Giardina's novel indeed can be seen to have expanding ripples of context, finding applicability both on micro familial scale, as well as on a regional and even national platform.

Part of the challenge with Appalachian literature is encouraging readers to reimagine the area apart from the stereotypes they have become accustomed to in pop culture. Much like *Silas House*, Giardina helps break apart preexisting constructions of Appalachia through dismantling traditional gender roles, thus adding new complexity and context to the narrative and including the heroines of the many grassroots movements that have come out of the region. Her protagonist Carrie is in many ways a

heroine of the novel as she traverses her own life alongside the ever-changing environment in her Grapevine Creek community. Scholar Cecelia Conway writes, "Carrie's voice embraces themes commonly associated with Appalachian women: the home place, the family, the mountains, and the desire for a lover. Her story braids a complex romantic plot with two plots often missing in female narratives: resistance and an adventurous quest" (Conway 141). Additionally, the novel opens with the birth of a child and C.J. Marcum's uncle acting as the midwife- a role most often associated with women. Conway writes, "Giardina's regendered midwife is assisting (male) cultural continuity by helping birth the boy and by passing on the life-giving and visionary traditions of stargazing, instrument making, banjo playing, storytelling, and midwifery. The regendering of the novel gives the characters agency which in turn holds them more accountable for their actions throughout the novel. For many, including CJ and Carrie, this works to their benefit as their decisions consistently adhere to their code of ethics. For Miles this has an opposite effect. Despite their father's strict upbringing, he abstains from his traditionally male roles such as hunting while growing up, often allowing Carrie to fill in where he falls short. This fuels Carrie's perseverance and often resistant spirit, but often makes Miles feel inadequate. Miles is trying to convince Carrie to stay away from the coal camps arguing that she is different from the other women there. He states, "They're old women. Spinster schoolteachers and such. A young woman is different. I know how these miners are." Carrie responds, "Do you, Miles? I smile sweetly. How are they?" She continues on stating, "Now you look here. I am a nurse. I seen more naked men than you got working in that mine. I give em baths. I been on my

own for three year of school, nobody telling me what to do. I lived in Justice town where they's bars and whores. Just what do you think you're protecting me from? (Giardina 91).

Giardina uses the combination of reimagined gender roles and multiple viewpoints to maximize context and avoid the victim blaming that so often is associated with Appalachia. Her voice is fierce and confident, so much so that she tried her hand at a career in politics, running as a third-party candidate for West Virginia governor in 2000. Although she lost, Giardina's intention was to raise awareness of issues that often get lost or else overshadowed by political rhetoric. Mountaintop Removal was a large part of her campaign, as well as "better access to healthcare, smaller schools, and greater regulation and taxation of the coal and timber industries" (House 51). Well aware of her own ferocity, Giardina herself writes:

Shortly after September 11, I was talking to my friend Jim Lewis and saying that I couldn't understand the logic of suicide bombers and he said, "Well now, I don't know, you might have a little bit of that in you." And I thoughts about it and said, "Well, I might actually." If it would stop mountaintop removal, would I strap a bomb on? Obviously I wouldn't but I'd sure love to save a mountain. But I wonder if that would even stop it. I just don't know (65).

This kind of enthusiasm and insistence on raising awareness and bringing context to so many of the issues in Appalachia translates to Giardina's characters- each with their own lens through which to see the destruction. It makes the comparison between

Deliverance and *Storming Heaven* striking with Dickey acting as voyeur and Giardina engaged advocate. Dickey's Appalachian characters are mere props, stripped not just of context, but any kind of agency as well. Appalachian readers have no choice but to feel vilified, frustrated and deflated when such a representation experiences such immense popularity, further drawing attention away from the real issues they are confronted with on a daily basis.

Appalachian writer Emma Bell Miles often has similar strains of ferocity in her own writing on the region. Born in Indiana in 1879, Miles didn't move into the region until she was nine, a background that would continually compel readers from inside and outside of the region to question her credibility as a mouthpiece for the area. This is in part due to her bold and often polarizing statements on the area. Elizabeth Engelhardt notes that, "Miles self-identifies as a mountain woman, at one point writing that 'it is often hard for me to notice points of difference between our way of life and civilization, I am so used to the backwoods.'" Whether the community accepted her mountain identity is a different question; certainly not everyone would agree it is in contrast to 'civilization' (Engelhardt 136). Nonetheless, Miles continued to write on her experience in the Tennessee Mountains, often approaching her "genre-blurring" works with a frankness that turned the romanticism of Local Color writing on its head. Her longest book, published in 1905 marries memoir, poetry, art and narrative becoming a kind of Appalachian collage. Much like in the case of Gipe, reading it becomes a multi-faceted experience as the reader traverses several different mediums which all blend together in an attempt to recreate a piece of mountain culture remotely. Perhaps most

importantly, Miles was a self-proclaimed suffragette, always supplying the long unseen reality of real women in an Appalachian agrarian society. Engelhardt writes, "Moreover, in almost every chapter Miles makes women's voices the strongest advocates for the mountains. Whereas the literatures of the tourist, voyeur, and social crusader did not imagine Appalachian women's culture at all, and whereas Murfree imagined it but did not or could not give the women voices, Miles makes the culture of Appalachia women explicitly political and vocal" (140). In addition to providing a voice for the often silent women of Appalachia, Miles also is able to capture perfectly the ebbs and flows that come with life in the region. At times she and her husband are happily married and at other times they are living in poverty with declining health and resources, yet "much of this book is as good as the best that has ever been written about the mountain people" (Rowell 81). Steven Cox outlines the complexity of *Spirit of the Mountains*:

I have talked with many people about their experience reading Emma Bell Miles's *Spirit of the Mountains* for the first time. No matter how many other Appalachian authors we have read, no matter how much women's literature, no matter how many philosophers from the early twentieth century, Miles and her best-known text stick with us. At first we turn the pages at a fevered pace, thinking Finally! Someone in the early twentieth century is crying to capture how complex Appalachia was...We love ourselves in the range of people and their concerns. Then, we notice how quickly the end of the book is arriving. We slow down, savoring every page, hoping to delay its end (Miles and Cox xi).

Indeed, Miles's rendering of Appalachia was quite original for her time and was thrust into a market dominated by authors like John Fox Jr. and the Local Color movement. In fact, Miles is often mistakenly categorized alongside the Local Color movement, despite her dramatic departure from their common reoccurring themes and rhetoric. At times she assumes the position of narrator, yet almost as soon as the reader becomes comfortable with this approach, she departs, unapologetically shifting into third person. She is at times defensive, humiliated, accusatory, frustrated and proud of her culture, allowing viewers to see the full spectrum of context as she is faced with a number of personal and economic challenges. Perhaps this approach most closely illustrates the parallel between Miles and Dawn of *Trampoline*. Both are simultaneously empowered and infuriated at their home-place—consistently called to it while also encouraged to leave it. In Chapter II Miles writes, “Only a superficial observer could fail to understand that the mountain people really love their wilderness—love it for its beauty, for its freedom” (Spalding 310-311). Writing at times as both Appalachian insider and outsider, Miles prioritizes context over the romanticism seen with Local Color writers. She illustrates a genuine concern for the health of the region, acting as both critic and advocate. Her distinctive form and style also adapt according to what aspect of the region she is trying to emphasize. Englehardt writes, “Today we might call it a hybrid, multigenre, experimental text. If she were writing it today, surely it would have a digital component, hyperlinks, and interactive crowd-sourced passages (Englehardt 16). What Englehardt is getting to is that Miles asks her readers to traverse this experience with her, pulling them into Appalachia rather than projecting Appalachia onto them. She is

continually shifting her tone and medium, keeping readers from becoming comfortable with one perception or voice in the region. This approach is a dramatic departure from the third-person, linear narratives circulating at the time.

Context in the frame of representation is important, and perhaps even more so when discussing Appalachian representation. For many, besides compassion and complexity, this is the single most important element needed for a successful Appalachian representation—in this case “successful” meaning accepted by Appalachian voices as a reliable portrayal of their culture. For many, a reliable portrayal is simply not the intention. Such is the case with James Dickey. *Deliverance* was meant to be a commentary about how far removed humans have become from their natural state, and how dangerous such urbanization can be. In this narrative, Dickey (and later Boorman) are simply using Appalachia as a personification of “the natural.” This becomes problematic because *Deliverance* came to be credited as an authentic portrayal of the region. In fact, based on Dickey’s own experiences, the narrative is the complete opposite of his own experiences in Appalachia, which makes this representation problematic for natives. To add to this already problematic situation, *Deliverance* experienced massive success both as a novel and at the box office, further damaging the myth of Appalachia already existent in pop culture.

Unlike James Dickey, many of Englehardt’s “social crusaders” have intentions to advocate for the region, but do so in a way that is severely lacking in context. “Christmas in Appalachia,” evoked pity and frustration from viewers, as Charles Kuralt glossed over the economic shortcomings of the region, focusing instead of the squalid conditions. He

took viewers into schoolrooms, homes, and convenience stores pointing out the inadequacies when compared to their more “urban” counterparts. This tactic had the effect of showing without educating, and ultimately did nothing to help alleviate the systematic breakdowns of, among other things, the coal industry that led to these conditions. 2009 brought the similar ABC special Program “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains.” While slightly better in its attempt to include context, Kentucky native Diane Sawyer still retreated when the moments came to actually point to the underlying causes for the distress in the region. She continually emphasizes “The Mountains” as an anomalous portion of the United States, rather than drawing attention to the very real role Appalachia plays in the larger United States. The drug epidemic is not a regional epidemic but rather a direct result of the larger economic forces at play in the United States. Similarly Mountain Dew Mouth ties into Coal Mining, capitalism, mountaintop removal, and politics yet the program focused solely on its effect on the teeth of children. After the program concluded, hundreds of thousands of gifts poured in for the four children who were covered in the documentary, yet this reaction is indicative of exactly how this program failed. Without shining a light on the larger injustices in the region, empathetic viewers are forced to make only micro changes for the region- positively affecting those four children but only temporarily, and not beginning to scratch the surface of the real issues that will continue to plague the region.

Pushing back against this lack of context are natives of Appalachia Denise Giardina and Emma Bell Miles, who both published works intended to give a holistic

look into the region. The two works both share multiple perspectives in order to maximize the ground they could cover in terms of providing context to the region. Giardina, an Appalachian political activist in her own right uses four different narrators in her novel *Storming Heaven*, each with a different perspective and experience with the region. Her heroine Carrie could be seen as Giardina's voice throughout the novel, using her skills and grit to continually advocate for the people she feels are being unjustly treated. Giardina creates a foil of sorts to Carrie in her brother Miles, whose education slowly warps his perception of the region he grew up with. These two narratives intersect and depart creating the momentum for the novel and providing a comprehensive view of how an area can breakdown and deconstruct within a matter of years. The Appalachians portrayed in Giardina's novel are unrecognizable when compared to Dickey's violent and predatory "hillbillies." Giardina writes them with power and agency which gives an authentic voice to the narrative. Finally, Emma Bell Miles uses her own experience traversing in and out of the region to write a pastiche of experience in *Spirit of the Mountains*. She bravely confronts the region while simultaneously advocating for and defending it. Through her blending of art, poetry, first and third person, Miles is able to pull the viewer through these experiences with her- asking them to see through her eyes and by doing so, to understand the complexity of a region that she loves so much.

Without context, viewers are forced to default to blaming the persons in the region for the conditions regularly shown, rather than taking a close look at the systematic breakdowns responsible. Chris Green and Erica Locklear summarize:

The doors to Appalachian experience continue to open when taking into consideration the point of view of African Americans, immigrant, and urban populations who are now seeking to explore the region. [...] the act of holding one another's writing accountable to the hard truths even as writers shared resources and provided encouragement. (Berry, Obermiller and Scott 80).

While it is certainly not an author's obligation to illustrate context within a narrative, it should be understood that the people represented may not be supportive of a final product without it- in particular a people who have been denigrated in pop culture for decades. Indeed, Dickey seemed saddened by not being able to return to Appalachia after the publication of *Deliverance* but not altogether surprised by it. Appalachians have continued to feel the burden of holding artists and filmmakers accountable for the decisions they make.

Conclusion:

In 2015 two Appalachian “outsiders” Jesse Camp, a former MTV star and his sister Marisha Camp (a working photographer) were driving through McDowell County, WV while on vacation when a group of children gathered off the side of the road caught their attention. They pulled over and began talking with the children, Marisha’s camera in hand. When they returned to their vehicle, it had been blocked by a McDowell County woman, who was soon joined by other residents of the area. The group quickly began to turn hostile towards the two, asking why they were taking pictures of their children and demanding to see the photographs. One local can be heard exclaiming, “You don’t live around here. You don’t need to take a picture of even a G-d damned rock” (Zhang). Marisha tried to explain that they were on vacation and were simply trying to take pictures of the houses, but the situation began to escalate, as heard in audio obtained later by Appalachian photographer Roger May. Marisha recalls the incident in a later interview stating, “I spent the next forty minutes crying, shaking, and begging in every way possible for everyone to calm down. With no cell phone reception, and under threat of being beaten or shot if I tried to go into the store and use a landline, I nervously sent text after text, silently praying that somehow, against all odds, something would go through so my mother would know where I was and wouldn’t spend weeks not knowing what had happened to her children.” In an attempt to explain the behavior of the “angry mob,” as they were later called, West Virginia native Rick Wilson describes the history of “porn poverty” that exists in Appalachian pop culture. He calls this practice “cultural strip mining,” which is essentially photographers and

documentarians coming into regions like West Virginia to take photographs and then market them to audiences outside of the region (Finn). While the two siblings were eventually able to escape without harm, the incident prompted more questions than answers, especially for Appalachian outsiders.

The incident with Jesse and Marisha Camp is eerily similar to that of Hugh O'Connor and points to the tension that is still present even forty-eight years later. This is in part due to the fact that the "porn poverty" and essentialist rhetoric surrounding Appalachia has not slowed down. In fact, one could argue there are more backwards representations of the region circulating in pop culture than ever before. In early 2000, CBS began working on a concept for a reality TV show entitled *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*, where they would take participants from the "rural south" and transplant them to upscale Los Angeles (James). The pushback from the Appalachian region against this concept was near-monumental, spearheaded by Dee Davis, the leader of the Center for Rural Strategies in Kentucky. Despite this, the *Appalachian Journal* reports that "After a very public uproar over CBS's plans for a reality show called *The Real Beverly Hillbillies* NBS apparently had managed to cast and shoot a very similar concept show, following an Appalachian family's adjustments to a ritzy lifestyle in Beverly Hills. A smaller uproar ensued, but the network has decided to cancel plans to air it" (Chronicle). It is clear that the network was insistent on pursuing the show and continues even today to deny that they have closed the door on the concept for good.

2016 brought the provocative TV show, *Outsiders*, which features the Farrell family “who live atop a mountain in southern Appalachia. It is 2016 elsewhere in America, but the Farrell tribe (who number between twenty and two hundred depending on which episode you watch) is living a lifestyle that is a bit retro, say by about two thousand years. They clothe themselves in animal pelts, walk barefoot, and do their internecine “feuding” with clubs” (Rash). Unlike *The Real Beverly Hillbillies*, season one of *Outsiders* aired, and was met with a decidedly mixed reaction. The *New York Times* writes, “Maybe there really are Kentucky hill clans who act like the staff at Medieval Times, but the best efforts of the actors in ‘Outsiders’ can’t make the Farrells credible, or convince us that there’s any real reason that townspeople, cops and energy executives should be afraid of them. On the other hand, the hillbilly vaudeville gives us something to watch and respond to” (Hale C2). Indeed even their family name Farrell (think feral) would indicate that producers are trying to convincingly portray a culture so isolated and primitive that they have failed to see progress at all over the last hundreds of years. Most frighteningly, some sources seem to believe that the show is actually a fictional depiction of a very real Appalachian culture. Brian Lowry writes for *Variety*, “the casting trumps much of the material, but the series quickly establishes a strong sense of place in the wilds of a still-untamed pocket of America” (Lowry). The idea that this show which features incest, illiteracy, violence, and superstition bordering on witchcraft within the first episode could be seen as a credible description of a real place is indicative of how monumental the myth of Appalachia has become, and how problematic it will continue to be.

While outsider representation often prompts the most hyperbolic representations of the culture, some argue that the more damaging images come from Appalachian out-migrants. Out-migrants are people who have roots in Appalachia but have since moved elsewhere and use photography, writing, or some other type of representation as a way to reflect on those roots. These migrants, such as Shelby Lee Adams, can be particularly problematic because they are able to claim authenticity even when their experience in the region was brief. Most recently Appalachian out-migrant J.D. Vance published a wildly popular memoir entitled *Hillbilly Elegy* which recounts his childhood growing up in Middletown, Ohio, raised by his Kentucky relatives. The book has gained national attention as Vance is an outspoken republican, former marine and Yale Law School graduate who puts the memoir in the context of the political atmosphere in the United States today. He focuses on poverty at the individual level, rather than attributing it to an overall structural inadequacy, which is appealing to many during one of the most talked-about election years to date. The irony with *Hillbilly Elegy* is that while examining poverty on the individual level, he is also applying universalism to his own experiences. This leads to reviews like Jennifer Senior in *The New York Times* who wrote, “Though the couple [his grandparents] eventually managed to achieve the material comforts of a middle-class life (house, car), they brought their Appalachian values and habits with them. Some were wonderfully positive, like loyalty and love of country. But others, like a tendency toward violence and verbal abuse, were inimical to family life (Senior C1). It is precisely this difference: inimical to *Vance’s* family life- not

necessarily Appalachian family life that has made this memoir problematic. Dwight Billings elaborates:

A nostalgic image of an Appalachian barn on the side of a dirt road is on the book's front cover. But Vance knows little about contemporary Appalachia—certainly not the region's vibrant grassroots struggles to build a post-coal economy. He has only visited family members in eastern Kentucky or attended funerals there. His inventory of pathological Appalachian traits—violence, fatalism, learned helplessness, poverty as a “family tradition”—reads like a catalog of stereotypes Appalachian scholars have worked so long to dispel (Billings).

Paul Prather, a contributing columnist for the Lexington, KY based newspaper, *The Herald Leader* has mostly positive feelings about the memoir, but offered criticism on the same point writing, “Pulling yourself up by your bootstraps is dandy if you're blessed with the intellectual and emotional wherewithal to ace Yale Law School. If you were born with fetal alcohol syndrome or an average IQ or chronic depression, Yale may not lie even in the same universe as your boots. There are matters over which bootstraps exercise little leverage (Prather). Appalachian out-migrants often take the approach of *my* Appalachian experience equals *the* Appalachian experience because they are not able to see the community and its members change and evolve over time. Vance's memoir is not unlike the camera of a voyeur- it is only one snapshot into an exceedingly complex culture.

Of course not all outsider, or out-migrant representations of Appalachian culture are damaging. There have been several that have been met with praise from those both inside and outside of the region. One example comes from Arkansas native and outsider John Grisham in his 2014 novel *Gray Mountain*. Patrick Anderson for *The Washington Post* writes, “Grisham makes his characters all too real, but the heart of his story is his relentless case against Big Coal. We all know something about the plight of miners, but we are unlikely to have encountered the realities of their lives in the depth provided here. This is muckraking of a high order. If it’s possible for a major novelist to shame our increasingly shameless society, *Gray Mountain* might do it” (Anderson). As a part of the release Grisham shared facts about mountaintop removal, helping to promote the cause to his outside audience. As a part of his research, Grisham spent a day with Mary Cromer, an attorney for the Appalachian Citizens’ Law Center in Whitesburg, KY who took him to MTR sites to help him see the devastation up-close (Ellis). It would appear that Grisham approached the book, as he does with most of his novels, with a sense of advocacy and education in mind for the very real issues that are plaguing the region, which has helped to alleviate criticism from the area.

My intention with this dissertation is not to argue that all outsiders will inevitably produce damaging representations of Appalachians, nor to prove that Appalachians are incapable of relying on stereotypes of their own culture. My intention is rather to contribute to an ongoing dialogue about the Myth of Appalachia as it appears in pop culture and the foundational reasons that such a myth has been able to expand and grow over time. The issue of insider vs. outsider has thorniness from all

sides, even in title alone. Who qualifies as an insider or outsider and why? Is this a label used exclusively by insiders or do outsiders too feel alienated from this culture. My hope is to begin to view this dynamic not a two separate poles of belonging but rather as a spectrum. On one side you have the working class Appalachian whose family has resided in the region for decades and on the other end, the American whose family lineage has never stepped east of the Mississippi River or South of the Ohio. In between these two poles lies endless, complex identities that may all be authentic in their own right. My own insider “claim” to the region for example, could be called into question at any point. While I was born in Parkersburg WV, I was raised in the suburbs of Louisville KY where I attended school. My paternal grandfather worked in the steel mill in Ashland, KY and my maternal grandfather was an engineer turned Methodist minister. My mother attended West Virginia University for her undergraduate degree and then the University of Kentucky for her PhD in psychology. While my roots are in Appalachia, I myself do not claim to be Appalachian, yet I have a familiarity and comfort with the culture that continually draws me in—an interest that has manifested itself in my research. I am empathetic to the region’s struggles and am similarly frustrated by the prevalence of incorrect and damaging representations that continually surface in pop culture. It is through an open dialogue with citizens on every level of this spectrum that I was able to sift through the frustration and identify these primary issues of compassion, complexity and context.

Compassion in this case is the desire from Appalachians that their culture be represented in such a way that it evokes empathy and understanding, not simply

sympathy. Photographs like those of Shelby Lee Adams are sensational and shocking. Their gritty portrayal of the region relies on the morbid curiosity of audiences, few of which walk away from a viewing feeling anything other than pity. His staging, lighting, and framing are unnecessarily dramatic and his insider claim often paints him as a martyr for the region, willing to venture into these decrepit pockets to help raise awareness; however his commercial success has been substantial and his reluctance to establish or maintain residence in the region all complicate such a claim. As author James Still and Harriette Arnow illustrate it is possible to illustrate desperate conditions in Appalachia while still maintaining compassion for the region. Both *River of Earth* and *The Dollmaker* use creative narration and strong female heroines to avoid the victim blaming that often accompanies Appalachian representation.

Complexity refers to the understanding that Appalachia is not comprised of a homogenous, working-class white population. Representations like *Li'l Abner* intentionally exclude diversity, perpetuating the notion that diversity is absent in Appalachia. While comic strips are meant to be hyperbolic, the circulation of such images still damage the pop culture "myth" of the region. To resist this representation, authors like Silas House, Frank X Walker, and Robert Gipe have produced works that are intended to showcase the diversity and complexity present in the region. House includes representation from the Cherokee population in his novel *Parchment of Leaves*, drawing attention to a cultural subset that many do not realize still exists after the Trail of Tears. Walker relies on his own insider claim to share his experience growing up black in Appalachia, coining the phrase Affrilachia. This description has caught fire in the

Appalachian community, prompting others to join and celebrate their diverse cultural experiences in the region. Finally Robert Gipe paints a portrait of contemporary Appalachia, with characters using up-to-date technology, listening to contemporary music and engaging with a variety of socioeconomic classes. He portrays real issues prevalent in the region but injects this portrayal with emotion and complexity through his narrator Dawn. Rather than feeling voyeuristic, the reader experiences the community through Dawn and is therefore able to examine the multi-faceted nature of contemporary Appalachia.

Finally, context is essential for helping to chip away at the long-standing representation of Appalachia in the media and pop culture. Special Programs like “Christmas in Appalachia” and “A Hidden America: Children of the Mountains” were seemingly intended advocate and to shine a light on the American “other,” but have traditionally done nothing more than to show the conditions present, with little to no explanation as to how those conditions came to be. Other artists such as James Dickey never intended to be an advocate for the region and used it merely as a prop for a larger point about the turn towards urbanity for American public. He was not writing a novel or making a movie about Appalachia, but rather about what Appalachia represented to him. Turning back to the point about intention, in this case his has become largely irrelevant. Instead, his depiction has become synonymous with the Appalachian region and has continually served as a point of reference for those describing the area.

The case studies explored in this dissertation were not chosen because they were the most egregious, nor the least. The specific case studies were explored because

each one can be argued for on both sides of the spectrum. It could be argued that *Trampoline* is written by an outsider who poorly represents the Appalachian people as drug addicts and deviants. Likewise some argue that Shelby Lee Adams' photographs are immensely compassionate portrayals of a culture he feels nostalgic for. These examples are constructed in this context as tools to begin to pick apart this discussion and focus on what factors into the dialogue around cultural representation and what can be seen as contributing to essentialism or otherwise resisting it. More than anything, I looked towards credible, outspoken advocates for the region for their opinions on published works to help determine a direction in my discussion. As Appalachians like Silas House often serve as mouthpieces, their opinions carry merit in this discussion. Whether they are the ones who influence the larger public or vice versa, the overall reaction is still the same. Perhaps moving forward, authors and photographers will rely less on preexisting stereotypical representations and more on these prominent voices coming out of the region itself. If Robert Schenkkan or Shelby Lee Adams had worked with Dwight Billings, Henry Shapiro, Katherine Ledford, Denise Giardina or any of the many voices speaking out against inaccurate and damaging representations before publishing their work, perhaps they would have found an audience both inside and outside of the region.

Appendix One: Images



1. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, *Deposition*, 1602-1604, oil on canvas, www.artstor.org.



2. Shelby Lee Adams, *The Hog Killin'*, 1990, Photograph from *Appalachian Portraits* (University Press of Mississippi, 1993).



3. Shelby Lee Adams, *The Home Funeral*, 1990, Photograph from *Appalachian Portraits* (University Press of Mississippi, 1993).



4. Shelby Lee Adams, *Leddie and Children*, 1990, Photograph from *Appalachian Portraits* (University Press of Mississippi, 1993).



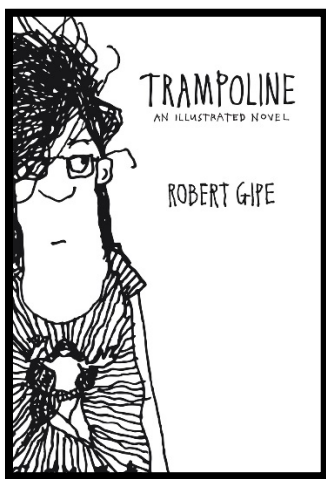
5. William Gedney, *Vivian Cornett Fixing Daughter's Hair*, 1964, Looking at Appalachia.



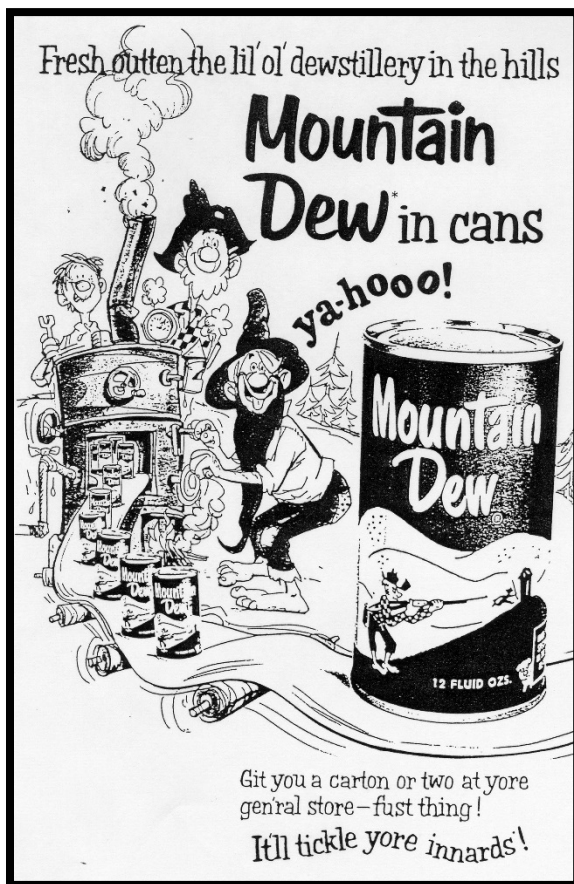
6. William Gedney, *Kentucky*, 1972; gelatin silver print, 11 in. x 14 in. (27.94 cm x 35.56 cm); Special Collections Library, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



7. William Gedney, Kentucky, 1964, *Woman Plucking Chicken*, Duke Digital Collections.



8. Robert Gipe, *Trampoline* (2015), “Daisy Duke” CBS *The Dukes of Hazzard* (1979), Al Capp, *Daisy Mae*, *Li'l Abner* (1977).



9. Anthony Harkins, *Hillbilly: A Cultural History of an American Icon*
"Willie the Hillbilly," (2003).

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